In November 1775 General George Washington ordered Colonel Henry Knox to bring the British artillery recently captured at Fort Ticonderoga to reinforce the siege of Boston. Washington knew firsthand of the difficulties of wilderness travel, especially in the winter, and he must have wondered if this city-bred officer was up to the task. Only twenty-five years old and a Boston bookseller with little experience in the woods, Knox was nevertheless the army’s senior artillerist, largely because he had read several books on the subject whenever business in his store was slow.

Knox and his men built crude sleds to haul their fifty-nine cannons through dense forest covered by two feet of snow. On good days they moved these sixty tons of artillery about seven miles. On two very bad ones, they shivered for hours in freezing water while retrieving guns that had fallen through the ice at river crossings. As their oxen grew weak from overexertion and poor feed, the men had to throw their own backs into pulling the cannons across New York’s frozen landscape. On reaching the Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts, their pace slowed to a crawl as they trudged uphill through snow-clogged passes. Forty days and three hundred miles after leaving Ticonderoga, Knox and his exhausted New Yorkers reported to Washington in late January 1776. The Boston bookseller had more than proved himself; he had accomplished one of the Revolution’s great feats of endurance.
The guns from Ticonderoga placed the outnumbered British in a hopeless position and forced them to evacuate Boston on March 17, 1776. A lifelong friendship formed between Knox and Washington. Knox served on the Virginian’s staff throughout the war and accepted his request to be the nation’s first secretary of war in 1789.

Friendships like the one between Washington and Knox were almost as revolutionary as the war that produced them. Colonists of different regions had few opportunities to become acquainted before 1775, and most Americans harbored regional prejudices. George Washington at first described New Englanders as “an exceeding dirty and nasty people.” Yankee soldiers irritated troops from the southern colonies with smug assumptions of superiority expressed in their popular marching song “Chester,” whose rousing lyrics rang out:

Let tyrants shake their iron rods,
And Slaver’s clank her galling chains.
We fear them not, We trust in God,
New England’s God forever reigns.

The Revolution gave white northerners and southerners their first real chance to learn what they had in common, and they soon developed mutual admiration. George Washington, who in the war’s early days dismissed New England officers as “the most indifferent kind of people I ever saw,” changed his mind after meeting men like Henry Knox.

In July 1776 the thirteen colonies had declared independence out of desperation and joined together in a loosely knit confederation of states. Only as a result of the collective hardships experienced during eight years of terrible fighting did the inhabitants cease to see themselves only as military allies and begin to accept one another as fellow citizens.

Even while the war was still under way, the United States of America was formalized with the adoption of a constitution, called the Articles of Confederation. But Americans remained divided over some basic political questions relating to the distribution of power and authority. These divisions were apparent in some states’ struggles to adopt constitutions and, even more forcefully, in the national contest over replacing the Articles. The ratification of a second Constitution in 1787 marked the passing of America’s short-lived Confederation and a triumph for those favoring more centralization of power at the national level.

This chapter focuses on four major questions:
- What were the most critical factors enabling the Americans to win the War of Independence with Britain?
- What changes did the Revolution promote in relationships among Americans of different classes, races, and genders?
- In what ways did the first state constitutions and the Articles of Confederation reflect older, pre-Revolutionary ideas about political power and authority? In what ways did they depart from older ideas?

How were the Constitution’s proponents able to appeal to Americans with wide-ranging views about the balance of power between national and state governments?

The Prospects of War

The Revolution was both a collective struggle that pitted the independent states against Britain and a civil war between American peoples. Americans opposed to the colonies’ independence constituted one of several factors working in Britain’s favor as war began. Others included Britain’s larger population and its superior military resources and preparation. America, on the other hand, was located far from Britain and enjoyed the intense commitment to independence of patriots and the Continental Army, led by the formidable George Washington.

Loyalists and Other British Sympathizers

As late as January 1776, most colonists still hoped that declaring independence from Britain would not be necessary. Not surprisingly, when separation came six months later, some Americans remained unconvinced that it was justified. About 20 percent of all whites either opposed the rebellion actively or refused to support the Confederation unless threatened with fines or imprisonment. Although these internal enemies of the Revolution called themselves loyalists, they were “Tories” to their Whig foes. Whigs remarked, but only half in jest, that “a tory was a thing with a head in England, a body in America, and a neck that needed stretching.”
Loyalists avowed many of the same political values as did the patriots. Like the rebels, they usually opposed Parliament’s claim to tax the colonies. Many loyalists thus found themselves fighting for a cause with which they did not entirely agree, and as a result many of them would change sides during the war. Most doubtless shared the apprehension expressed in 1775 by the Reverend Jonathan Boucher, a well-known Maryland loyalist, who preached with two loaded pistols lying on his pulpit cushion: “For my part I equally dread a Victory by either side.”

Loyalists disagreed, however, with the patriots’ insistence that only independence could preserve the colonists’ constitutional rights. The loyalists denounced separation as an illegal act certain to ignite an unnecessary war. Above all, they retained a profound reverence for the crown and believed that if they failed to defend their king, they would sacrifice their personal honor.

The mutual hatred between Whigs and Tories exceeded that of patriots and the British. Each side saw its cause as so sacred that opposition by a fellow American was an unforgivable act of betrayal. The worst atrocities committed during the war were inflicted by Americans upon each other.

The most important factor in determining loyalist strength in any area was the degree to which local Whigs exerted political authority and successfully convinced their neighbors that the king and Parliament threatened their liberty. New England town leaders, the Virginia gentry, and the rice planters of South Carolina’s seacoast had vigorously pursued a program of political education and popular mobilization from 1772 to 1776. Repeatedly explaining the issues at public meetings, these elites persuaded the overwhelming majority to favor resistance. As a result, probably no more than 5 percent of whites in these areas were committed loyalists in 1776. Where leading families acted indecisively, however, their communities remained divided when the fighting began. With elites in New York and New Jersey especially reluctant to declare their allegiance to either side, the proportion of loyalists was highest there. Those two states eventually furnished about half of the twenty-one thousand Americans who fought in loyalist military units.

The next most significant factor influencing loyalist military strength was the geographic distribution of recent British immigrants, who remained closely identified with their homeland. Among these newcomers were thousands of British soldiers who had served in the Seven Years’ War and stayed on in the colonies, usually in New York, where they could obtain land grants of two hundred acres. An additional 125,000 English, Scots, and Irish landed from 1763 to 1775—the greatest number of Britons to arrive during any dozen years of the colonial era. In New York, Georgia, and the backcountry of North and South Carolina, where native-born Britons were heavily concentrated, the proportion of loyalists among whites probably ranged from 25 percent to 40 percent in 1776. In wartime the British army organized many Tory units comprising immigrants from the British Isles, including the Loyal Highland Emigrants, the North Carolina Highlanders, and the Volunteers of Ireland. After the war foreign-born loyalists were a majority of those compensated by the British for property losses during the Revolution—including three-quarters of all such claimants from the Carolinas and Georgia.

Canada’s religious and secular elites comprised another significant white minority to hold pro-British
sympathies. After the British had conquered New France in the Seven Years’ War, the Quebec Act of 1774 guaranteed Canadians religious freedom and continued partial use of French civil law, measures that reconciled Quebec’s elites to British rule. But as Continental forces invaded Quebec in 1775–1776, they found widespread support among both French and English Canadians. Although British forces repulsed the invasion, many Canadians continued to hope for an American victory. But Britain’s military hold on the region remained strong throughout the war.

Other North Americans supported the British cause not out of loyalty to the crown but from a perception that an independent America would pose the greater threat to their own liberty and independence. For example, recent settlers in the Ohio Valley disagreed about which course would guarantee the personal independence they valued above all (see A Place in Time: Boonesborough, Kentucky, 1778). A few German, Dutch, and French religious congregations doubted that their rights would be as safe in an independent nation dominated by Anglo-Americans. Yet as in Canada, most non-British whites in the thirteen colonies supported the Revolution. The great majority of German colonists, for example, had embraced republicanism by 1776 and would overwhelmingly support the cause of American independence.

The rebels never attempted to win over three other mainland colonies—Nova Scotia and East and West Florida—whose small British populations consisted of recent immigrants and British troops. Nor was independence seriously considered in Britain’s thirteen West Indian colonies, which were dominated by absentee plantation owners who lived in England and depended on selling their sugar exports in the protected British market.

The British cause would also draw significant wartime support from nonwhites. Prior to the outbreak of fighting, African-Americans made clear that they considered their own liberation from slavery a higher priority than the colonies’ independence from Britain. While Virginia slaves flocked to Lord Dunmore’s ranks (see Chapter 5), hundreds of South Carolina slaves had escaped and had taken refuge on British ships in Charles Town’s harbor. During the war thousands of enslaved African-Americans, mostly from the southern colonies, escaped their southern owners and signed on as laborers or soldiers in the Royal Army. Among the slaveholders who saw many of his slaves escape to British protection was Thomas Jefferson. On the other hand, most African-Americans in the northern colonies calculated that supporting the rebels would hasten their own liberation.

Although Native Americans were deeply divided, most supported the British, either from the outset or after being pressured by one side or the other to abandon neutrality. Indians in contested areas recognized the danger to their homelands posed by expansion-minded Anglo-Americans. In the Ohio Country, Shawnees, Delawares, Mingos, and other Indians continued to bristle at settlers’ incursions, as did the Cherokees to the south. After the uprising of 1763 (see Chapter 5), Native Americans in the Upper Great Lakes had developed good rapport with British agents in the former French forts and were solidly in the British camp.

The Six Nations Iroquois and the Creek confederacies, whose neutrality had been a source of unity and strength until the French defeat in 1760, were now divided. Creeks’ allegiances reflected each village’s earlier trade ties with either Britain or Spain (the latter leaned
The Opposing Sides

Britain entered the war with two major advantages. First, in 1776 the 11 million inhabitants of the British Isles greatly outnumbered the 2.5 million colonists, one-third of whom were either slaves or loyalists. Second, Britain possessed the world’s largest navy and one of its best professional armies. Even so, the royal military establishment grew during the war years to a degree that strained Britain’s resources. The number of soldiers stationed in North America, the British Isles, and the West Indies more than doubled from 48,000 to 111,000 men. To meet its manpower needs, the British government hired 30,000 German mercenaries known as Hessians and later enlisted 21,000 loyalists.

Despite its smaller population, the new nation mobilized about 220,000 troops, compared to the 162,000 who served in the British army. But most Americans served short terms, and the new nation would have been hard-pressed had it not been for the military contributions of France and Spain in the war’s later stages.

Britain’s ability to crush the rebellion was further weakened by the decline in its sea power, a result of budget cuts after 1763. Midway through the war, half of the Royal Navy’s ships sat in dry dock awaiting major repairs. Although the navy expanded rapidly from 18,000 to 111,000 sailors, it lost 42,000 men to desertion and 20,000 to disease or wounds. In addition, Britain’s merchant marine suffered from raids by American privateers. During the war rebel privateers and the fledgling U.S. navy would capture over two thousand British merchant vessels and sixteen thousand crewmen.

Britain could ill afford these losses, for it faced a colossal task in trying to supply its troops in America. In fact, it had to import from Britain most of the food consumed by its army, a third of a ton per soldier per year. Seriously overextended, the navy barely kept the army supplied and never effectively blockaded American ports.

Mindful of the enormous strain that the war imposed, British leaders faced serious problems maintaining their people’s support for the conflict. The war more than doubled the national debt, thereby adding to the burdens of a people already paying record taxes. The politically influential landed gentry could not be expected to vote against their pocketbooks forever.

The new nation faced different but no less severe wartime problems. Besides the fact that many colonists and Native Americans favored the British, the patriots faced a formidable military challenge. Although state militias sometimes performed well in hit-and-run guerrilla skirmishes, they lacked the training to fight pitched battles against professional armies like Britain’s. Congress recognized that independence would never be secured if the new nation relied on guerrilla tactics, avoided major battles, and allowed the British to occupy all major population centers. Moreover, because European powers would interpret dependence on guerrilla warfare as evidence that Americans could not drive out the British army, that strategy would doom efforts by the Continental Congress to gain foreign loans, diplomatic recognition, and military allies.

The Continental Army thus had to fight in the standard European fashion. Professional eighteenth-century armies relied on expert movements of mass formations. Victory often depended on rapid maneuvers to crush an enemy’s undefended flank or rear. Attackers needed exceptional skill in close-order drill in order to fall on an enemy before the enemy could re-form and return fire. Because muskets had a range of less than one hundred yards, armies in battle were never far apart. Battles usually occurred in open country with space for maneuver. The troops advanced within musket range of each other, stood upright without cover, and fired volleys at one another until one line weakened from its casualties. Discipline, training, and nerve were essential if soldiers were to stay in ranks while comrades fell beside them. The stronger side then attacked at a quick walk with bayonets drawn and drove off its opponents.

In 1775 Britain possessed a well-trained army with a strong tradition of discipline and bravery under fire. In contrast, the Continental Army had neither an inspirational heritage nor many experienced officers or
sergeants who might turn raw recruits into crack units. Consequently, the Americans experienced a succession of heartbreaking defeats in the war’s early years. Yet, to win the war, the Continentals did not have to destroy the British army but only prolong the rebellion until Britain’s taxpayers lost patience with the struggle. Until then, American victory would depend on the ability of one man to keep his army fighting despite defeat. That man was George Washington.

George Washington

Few generals ever looked and acted the role as much as Washington. He spoke with authority and comported himself with dignity. At six feet two inches, he stood a half-foot taller than the average man of his day. Powerfully built, athletic, and hardened by a rugged outdoor life, he was one of the war’s few generals whose presence on the battlefield could inspire troops to heroism.

Washington’s military experience began at age twenty-two, when he took command of a Virginia regiment raised to resist French claims. His mistakes and lost battles in the Ohio Valley (see Chapter 5) taught him lessons that he might not have learned from easy, glorious victories. He discovered the dangers of overconfidence and the need for determination in the face of defeat. He also learned much about American soldiers, especially that they performed best when led by example and treated with respect.

With Virginia’s borders safe from attack in 1758, Washington resigned his commission and became a tobacco planter. He sat in the Virginia House of Burgesses, where his influence grew, not because he thrust himself into every issue but because others respected him and sought his opinion. Having emerged as an early, though not outspoken, opponent of parliamentary taxation, he also sat in the Continental Congress. In the eyes of the many who valued his advice and remembered his military experience, Washington was the logical choice to head the Continental Army.

War and Peace, 1776–1783

The Revolutionary War initially centered on the North, where each side won some important victories. Meanwhile, American forces prevailed over British troops and their Native American allies to gain control of the trans-Appalachian West. The war was decided in the South when American and French forces won a stunning victory at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. In the peace treaty that followed, Britain finally acknowledged American independence.

Shifting Fortunes in the North, 1776–1778

Henry Knox’s successful transport of artillery from Ticonderoga to Boston prompted the British to evacuate Boston in March 1776 and to move on to New York, which they wished to seize and use as a base for conquering New England. Under two brothers—General William Howe and Admiral Richard, Lord Howe—130 warships carrying thirty-two thousand royal troops landed near New York harbor in the summer of 1776 (see Map 6.1). Defending New York, America’s second-largest city, were eighteen thousand poorly trained soldiers under George Washington.

By the end of the year, William Howe’s men had killed or captured one-quarter of Washington’s troops and had forced the survivors to retreat from New York across New Jersey and the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. Thomas Paine aptly described these demoralizing days as “the times that try men’s souls.”

With the British in striking distance of Philadelphia, Washington decided to seize the offensive before the morale of his army and country collapsed completely. On Christmas night 1776 he led his troops back into New Jersey and attacked a Hessian garrison at Trenton, where he captured 918 Germans and lost only 4 Continentals. Washington then attacked 1,200 British at Princeton on January 3, 1777, and killed or took captive one-third of them while sustaining only 40 casualties.

These American victories at Trenton and Princeton had several important consequences. At a moment when defeat seemed inevitable, they boosted civilian and military morale. In addition, they drove a wedge between New Jersey’s five thousand loyalists and the British army. Washington’s victories forced the British to remove virtually all their New Jersey garrisons to New York early in 1777, while Washington established winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey, only twenty-five miles from New York City.

New Jersey loyalism never recovered from the blow it received when the British evacuated the state. The state militia disarmed known loyalists, jailed their leaders, and kept a constant watch on suspected Tories. Ironically, the British themselves contributed to the undermining of New Jersey loyalism, for prior to the Battle of Trenton, British commanders had failed to prevent an orgy of looting by their troops that victimized
loyalists and Whigs equally. Surrounded by armed enemies and facing constant danger of arrest, most loyalists who remained in the state bowed to the inevitable and swore allegiance to the Continental Congress. Some even enlisted in the rebel militia.

After the battle of Princeton, the Marquis de Lafayette, a young French aristocrat, joined Washington's staff. Lafayette was twenty years old, highly idealistic, very brave, and infectiously optimistic. Given Lafayette's close connections with the French court, his presence in America indicated that the French king, Louis XVI, might recognize American independence and perhaps declare war on Britain. Before recognizing the new nation, however, Louis wanted proof that the Americans could win a major battle, a feat they had not yet accomplished.

Louis did not have to wait long. In summer 1777 the British planned a two-pronged assault intended to crush
American resistance in New York State and thereby isolate New England. Pushing off from Montreal, a force of regulars and their Iroquois allies under Lieutenant Colonel Barry St. Leger would march south along Lake Ontario and invade central New York from Fort Oswego in the west. At the same time General John Burgoyne would lead the main British force south from Quebec through eastern New York and link up with St. Leger near Albany.

Nothing went according to British plans. St. Leger’s force of 1,900 British and Iroquois advanced one hundred miles and halted to besiege 750 New York Continentals at Fort Stanwix. Unable to take the post after three weeks, St. Leger retreated in late August 1777.

Burgoyne’s campaign appeared more promising after his force of 8,300 British and Hessians recaptured Fort Ticonderoga. But Burgoyne ran short of supplies as General Horatio Gates gathered nearly 17,000 American troops for an attack. Gates fought two indecisive battles near Saratoga in the fall, inflicting another 1,200 casualties on Burgoyne. Surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered, Burgoyne’s 5,800 troops honorably laid down their arms on October 17, 1777.

The diplomatic impact of the Battle of Saratoga rivaled its military significance and would prove to be the war’s turning point. The victory convinced France that the Americans could win the war. In February 1778 France formally recognized the United States. Four months later, it went to war with Britain. Spain declared war on Britain in 1779, but this earthy German instinctively liked Americans and became immensely popular. He had a talent for motivating men (sometimes by staging humorous tantrums featuring a barrage of German, English, and French swearing); but more important, he possessed administrative genius. In a mere four months, General Steuben almost single-handedly turned the army into a formidable fighting force.

General Henry Clinton, now British commander-in-chief, evacuated Philadelphia in mid-1778 and marched to New York. The Continental Army received a desperately needed boost in February 1778, when the German soldier of fortune Friedrich von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge. The short, squat Steuben did not look like a soldier, but this earthy German instinctively liked Americans and became immensely popular. He had a talent for motivating men (sometimes by staging humorous tantrums featuring a barrage of German, English, and French swearing); but more important, he possessed administrative genius. In a mere four months, General Steuben almost single-handedly turned the army into a formidable fighting force.

Washington at their head and Lafayette at his side, sixteen thousand Continentals occupied the imperiled city in late August 1777.

The two armies collided on September 11, 1777, at Brandywine Creek, Pennsylvania. In the face of superior British discipline, most Continental units crumbled, and Congress fled Philadelphia in panic, enabling Howe to occupy the city. Howe again defeated Washington at Germantown on October 4. In one month’s bloody fighting, 20 percent of the Continentals were killed, wounded, or captured.

While the British army wintered comfortably eighteen miles away in Philadelphia, the Continentals huddled in the bleak hills of Valley Forge. Despite severe shortages of food, clothing, and shelter, the troops somehow preserved a sense of humor, which they occasionally demonstrated by joining together in a thousand voices to squawk like crows watching a cornfield. Underlying these squawks was real hunger: James Varnum reported on December 20 that his Connecticut and Rhode Island troops had gone two days without meat and three days without bread.

The army slowly regained its strength but still lacked training. The Continentals had forced Burgoyne to surrender more by their overwhelming numbers than by their skill. Indeed, when Washington’s men had met Howe’s forces on equal terms, they lost badly. The Americans mainly lacked the ability to march as compact units and maneuver quickly. Regiments often straggled single-file into battle and then wasted precious time forming to attack, and few troops were expert in bayonet drill.

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General Henry Clinton, now British commander-in-chief, evacuated Philadelphia in mid-1778 and marched to New York. The Continental Army got its first opportunity to demonstrate Steuben’s training when it caught up with Clinton’s rear guard at Monmouth Court House, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778. The battle raged for six hours in one-hundred-degree heat until Clinton broke off contact. Expecting to renew the fight at daybreak, the
Americans slept on their arms, but Clinton's army slipped away before then. The British would never again win easily, except when they faced more militiamen than Continentals.

The Battle of Monmouth ended the contest for the North. Clinton occupied New York, which the Royal Navy made safe from attack. Washington kept his army nearby to watch Clinton, while the Whig militia hunted down the last few Tory guerrillas and extinguished loyalism.

**The War in the West, 1776–1782**

A different kind of war developed west of the Appalachians and along the western borders of New York and Pennsylvania, where the fighting consisted of small-scale skirmishes rather than major battles involving thousands of troops. Native Americans and Anglo-Americans had alternately traded, negotiated, and fought in this region for several decades. But longstanding tensions between Native peoples and land-hungry settlers continued to simmer. In one sense, then, the warfare between Indians and white Americans only continued a more deeply rooted struggle. Despite its smaller scale, the war in the West was fierce, and the stakes—for the new nation, for the British, and for Indians in the region—could not have been higher.

The war in the West erupted in 1776 when Cherokees began attacking whites from North Carolina and other southern colonies who had settled in or near their homelands (see Map 6.2). After suffering heavy losses, the colonies recovered and organized retaliatory expeditions. Within a year these expeditions had burned most Cherokee towns, forcing the Cherokees to sign treaties that ceded most of their land in South Carolina and substantial tracts in North Carolina and Tennessee.

The intense fighting lasted longer in the Northwest. Largely independent of American and British coordination, Ohio Indians and white settlers fought for two years in Kentucky with neither side gaining a clear advantage (see A Place in Time: Boonesborough, Kentucky, 1778). But after British troops occupied French settlements in the area that is now Illinois and Indiana, Colonel George Rogers Clark led 175 Kentucky militiamen north of the Ohio River. After capturing and losing the French community of Vincennes on the Wabash River, Clark retook the settlement for good in February 1779. With the British unable to offer assistance, their Native American allies were vulnerable. In May, John Bowman led a second Kentucky unit in a campaign that destroyed most Shawnee villages, and in August a move northward from Pittsburgh by Daniel Brodhead inflicted similar damage on the Delawares and the Seneca Iroquois. Although these raids depleted their populations and food supplies, most Ohio Indians resisted the Americans until the war's end.

Meanwhile pro-British Iroquois, led by the gifted Mohawk leader Joseph Brant, devastated the Pennsylvania and New York frontiers in 1778. They killed 340 Pennsylvania militia at Wyoming, Pennsylvania, and probably slew an equal number in their other raids. In 1779 American General John Sullivan retaliated by invading Iroquois country with 3,700 Continental troops, along with several hundred Tuscaroras and Oneidas who had broken with the other Iroquois nations. Sullivan fought just one battle, near present-day Elmira, New York, in which his artillery routed Brant's warriors. Then he burned two dozen Indian villages and destroyed a million bushels of corn, causing most Iroquois to flee without food into Canada. Untold hundreds starved during the next winter, when more than sixty inches of snow fell.

In 1780 Brant's thousand warriors fell upon the Tuscaroras and Oneidas and then laid waste to Pennsylvania and New York for two years. But this final whirlwind of Iroquois fury masked reality: Sullivan's campaign had devastated the Iroquois, whose
Although the American Revolution was primarily a contest involving the seaboard colonies and Britain, it had another dimension in the trans-Appalachian West. There it was one in a long sequence of wars for control of the region. From 1753 to 1815 Native Americans cooperated, fought with, or tried to avoid the Spanish, French, British, and Anglo-Americans who intruded on their homelands.

Anglo-American settlers were usually the most immediate threat to Indians because the two peoples competed for the same resources needed for survival—above all, land. Yet many settlers could not count on support from eastern whites, either because they had defied eastern political authorities or because the westerners were simply too far away from the East, where the war was centered. Concerned above all with securing land and surviving, most western settlers cared little about the outcome of the Revolution, except to the extent that it might affect their own prospects. Indeed, many were prepared to make peace with Britain or even with Native Americans, with whom they were often personally if uneasily acquainted.

This was the case with Daniel Boone of Kentucky. As a young North Carolinian, Boone had hunted in the upper Ohio country, where in 1769 he was seized by Shawnees and held for two years. Undaunted, Boone attempted to lead kinfolk and neighbors into the Ohio valley in 1773 but was turned back by attacking Indians. Two years later, he was hired by land speculators to guide a road-building crew through the Cumberland Gap and founded the town of Boonesborough on the upper Kentucky River in April 1775.

Although Boonesborough officially celebrated news of America’s Declaration of Independence in July 1776, townspeople were divided. Some opposed eastern patriot elites, while others wanted no contact with outside authorities and tried to remain neutral. Still others thought that American independence was the best guarantee of their personal independence. Finally, many simply followed other family members in joining either the Tories or the Whigs.

The Shawnees were likewise divided. While some remain neutral, others sided with Blackfish, a renowned war leader from Chillicothe who felt that the war would allow Shawnees to regain their former homelands south of the Ohio (ceded by the Iroquois to Britain in 1768; see Chapter 5). Other Shawnees, seeing no hope for peace, moved west.

In 1777 Blackfish led two war parties against Boonesborough and in February 1778 captured Boone...
and twenty-six other Boonesborough men. The men were publicly paraded before Chillicothe villagers seeking to adopt individuals to replace dead family members. Half the captives were taken to the British authorities in Detroit for bounties. The rest, including Boone, were adopted.

Boone was adopted by Blackfish himself to replace a son killed in an earlier raid on Boonesborough. The illustrious white captive was bathed in the river, plucked of all hair except for a scalplock that hung from the top of his head to one side, and dressed for his naming ceremony. Blackfish then welcomed his adopted son Sheltowee ("Big Turtle") into his family.

Several fellow captives feared that Boone's adoption meant he might betray them to the Shawnees or British, but he escaped in June and returned to Boonesborough. Townspeople suspected Boone's intentions but agreed to prepare for an anticipated attack by securing the stockade and expanding the food supply.

On the morning of September 7, 1778, sixty fighting men and other residents of Boonesborough watched as four hundred Shawnees plus a British unit from Detroit emerged from the woods to within rifle range of the stockade. A young African man, Pompey, captured as a boy from a Virginia plantation and now Chillicothe's English translator, stepped forward to summon Boone to come out and speak with his father Blackfish. After the two men embraced and exchanged gifts, Blackfish lamented his son's escape and hoped they could now reunite, with the townspeople surrendering and accompanying the Shawnees to Detroit. Boone agreed to consult with his men and report back the next day. Although Boone would have been willing to take his chances and surrender, the rest of the men vowed to fight to the death. Boone then said, "Well, well, I'll die with the rest."

The next day Boonesborough's leading men emerged from the stockade to invite their Shawnee counterparts to join them in an elaborate feast. They were repaying Blackfish and his people for their earlier hospitality but also wanted to show that they had enough provisions to withstand a prolonged siege. When Blackfish asked his son for Boonesborough's decision, Boone replied that the men had vowed to fight to the death. Blackfish expressed great sorrow and made another offer: the adversaries would recognize the Ohio as the boundary dividing them but allow one another to cross the river freely to hunt or visit. The townspeople asked for time to consider the offer. The next event occurred so suddenly that participants could not later recall the details.

Declaring that peace was now at hand, Blackfish called on his leading men to embrace their Boonesborough counterparts, but the white men sensed a trap and fought their way past the approaching Shawnees and into the stockade, while riflemen on both sides unleashed hales of gunfire.

For seventeen days, the two sides fired at each other while the Shawnees tried to burn the fort and tunnel toward it. Inside, men, women, and children—free and enslaved—fired guns and prepared and distributed food. Boone's daughter, Gamma Calloway, was wounded while tending to the wounds of others. Finally, after a torrential downpour collapsed the nearly completed tunnel, the exhausted and demoralized Shawnees withdrew.

The siege of Boonesborough, like the rest of the Revolutionary War in the West, had no immediate military significance. Instead, it reflected the divided and uncertain loyalties of both Native Americans and whites in the region. The siege would later be remembered as a symbolic moment in the history of the American West, when outnumbered settlers defended their tiny world against a "savage" onslaught and made possible America's future growth and prosperity. Such remembering was partial at best, for it overlooked what settlers and Shawnees had shared and forgot that even the siege's hero was far from certain of his own loyalties at the time.
population declined by about one-third during the eight-year war.

Fighting continued in the West until 1782. Despite their intensity, the western campaigns did not determine the outcome of the war itself. Nevertheless, they had a significant impact on the future shape of the United States, as discussed later.

**American Victory in the South, 1778-1781**

In 1778 the war's focus shifted to the South. The entry of France and Spain turned the conflict into an international war; Britain was suddenly locked in a struggle that extended from India to Gibraltar to the West Indies and the American mainland. Between 1779 and 1781, Spanish troops based in Louisiana drove the British from West Florida, effectively preventing Britain from taking the Mississippi valley. Britain sent thousands of soldiers to Ireland and the West Indies to guard against a French invasion, thus reducing the manpower available to fight in North America. The French and Spanish navies, which together approximately equaled the British fleet, won several large battles, denied Britain control of the sea, and punctured the Royal Navy's blockade.

Nevertheless, British officials remained optimistic. By securing ports in the South, Britain would acquire the flexibility to move its forces back and forth between the West Indies and the mainland as necessity dictated. In addition, the South looked like a relatively easy target. General Henry Clinton expected that a renewed invasion there would tap a huge reservoir of loyalist support. In sum, the British plan was to seize key southern ports
and, with the aid of loyalist militiamen, move back toward the North, pacifying one region after another.

The plan unfolded smoothly at first. In spring 1778 British troops from East Florida took control of Georgia. After a two-year delay caused by political bickering at home, Clinton sailed from New York with nine thousand troops and forced the surrender of Charles Town, South Carolina, and its thirty-four-hundred-man garrison on May 12, 1780 (see Map 6.3). However, the British quickly found that there were fewer loyalists than they had expected.

Southern loyalism had suffered several serious blows since the war began. When the Cherokees had attacked the Carolina frontier in 1776, they killed whites indiscriminately. Numerous Tories had switched sides, joining the rebel militia to defend their homes. Then, as in Virginia earlier, the arrival of British troops sparked a mass exodus of enslaved Africans from their plantations. About one-third of Georgia’s blacks and one-fourth of South Carolina’s—twenty-five thousand in all—fled to British lines or to British-held Florida in quest of freedom. However, the British had no interest in emancipating slaves, and British officials made every effort to return the runaways to loyalist owners or otherwise to keep them in bondage. But plantation owners were angry about the loss of many slaves and fearful that the wholesale rupturing of their authority would lead to a black uprising. Despite British efforts to placate them, many loyalist planters and other whites abandoned the British and welcomed the rebels’ return to power in 1782. Those who remained loyalists, embittered by countless instances of harsh treatment under patriot
Military realities largely influenced the terms of the peace. Britain recognized American independence and agreed to the evacuation of all royal troops from the new nation's soil. The British had little choice but to award the Confederation all lands east of the Mississippi. Although the vast majority of Americans lived in the thirteen states clustered near the eastern seaboard, twenty thousand Anglo-Americans now lived west of the Appalachians. Moreover, Clark's victories had given Americans control of the Northwest, while Spain had kept Britain out of the Southwest. The treaty also gave the new nation important fishing rights off the Grand Banks of Canada.

On the whole, the settlement was highly favorable to the Confederation, but it left some disputes unresolved. Under a separate treaty, Britain returned East and West Florida to Spain, but the boundaries designated by this treaty were ambiguous. Spain interpreted the treaty to mean that it regained the same Florida territory that it had ceded to Britain in 1763. But Britain's treaty with the

rule, lost little time in taking revenge. Patriots struck back whenever possible, perpetuating an ongoing cycle of revenge, retribution, and retaliation.

The southern conflict was not all personal feuds and guerrilla warfare. After the capture of Charles Town, Horatio Gates took command of American forces in the South. With only a small force of Continentals at his disposal, Gates had to rely on poorly trained militiamen. In August 1780 Lord Charles Cornwallis inflicted a crushing defeat on Gates at Camden, South Carolina. Fleeing after firing a single volley, Gates's militia left his badly outnumbered Continentals to be overrun. Camden was the worst rebel defeat of the war.

Washington and Congress responded by relieving Gates of command and sending General Nathanael Greene to confront Cornwallis. Greene subsequently fought three major battles between March and September 1781, and he lost all of them. "We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again," he wrote back to Washington. Still, Greene won the campaign, for he gave the Whig militia the protection they needed to hunt down loyalists, stretched British supply lines until they began to snap, and sapped Cornwallis's strength by inflicting much heavier casualties than the British general could afford. Greene's dogged resistance forced Cornwallis to leave the Carolina backcountry in American hands and to lead his battered troops into Virginia.

Clinton wanted Cornwallis to return to Charles Town and renew his Carolina campaign; but Cornwallis had a mind of his own and established a new base at Yorktown, Virginia. From Yorktown Cornwallis planned to fan out into Virginia and Pennsylvania, but he never got the chance. Britain's undoing began on August 30, 1781, when a French fleet dropped anchor off the Virginia coast and landed troops near Yorktown. After Lafayette and a small force of Continentals joined the French, Washington moved his army south from New York to tighten the noose around Cornwallis. Trapped in Yorktown, six thousand British stood off eighty-eight hundred Americans and seventy-eight hundred French for three weeks before surrendering with military honors on October 19, 1781.

**Peace at Last, 1781-1783**

“Oh God!” Lord North exclaimed upon hearing of Yorktown, “It's all over.” Cornwallis’s surrender drained the will of England's overtaxed people to fight and forced the government to commence peace negotiations. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay were America's principal diplomats at the peace talks in Paris, which began in June 1782.
Confederation named the thirty-first parallel as the Floridas’ northern border, well south of the area claimed by Spain. Spain and the United States would dispute the northern boundary of Florida until 1795 (see below and Chapter 7).

The Peace of Paris also planted the seeds of several future disputes between Britain and the Americans. Contrary to terms in the treaty agreed to by the Americans, several state governments later refused to compensate loyalists for their property losses and erected barriers against British creditors’ attempts to collect prewar debts. Ostensibly in response, Britain refused to honor treaty pledges to abandon forts in the Northwest and to return Americans’ slaves under their control.

Notably missing in the Peace of Paris was any reference to Native Americans, most of whom had supported the British in order to avert the alternative—an independent American nation that would be no friend to Indian interests. In effect, the treaty left the Native peoples to deal with the Confederation on their own, without any provision for their status or treatment. Not surprisingly, many Native Americans did not acknowledge the new nation’s claims to sovereignty over their territory.

The Peace of Paris ratified American independence, but winning independence had exacted a heavy price. At least 5 percent of all free males between the ages of sixteen and forty-five—white, black, and Native American—died fighting the British. Only the Civil War produced a higher ratio of casualties to the nation’s population. Furthermore, the war drove perhaps one of every six loyalists and several thousand slaves into exile in Canada, Britain, the West Indies, and West Africa. Perhaps as much as 20 percent of New York’s white population fled. When the British evacuated Savannah in 1782, 15 percent of Georgia’s whites accompanied them. Most whites who departed were recent British immigrants. Finally, although the war secured American independence, it did not settle two important issues: what kind of society America was to become and what sort of government the new nation would possess. But the war had a profound effect on both questions.

The Revolution and Social Change

The social tensions exposed during the imperial crises of 1765–1775 (see Chapter 5) were subsequently magnified and complicated by two factors: first, the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence; and second, dislocations caused by the war itself. As a result, the Revolution brought significant, if limited, changes to relationships between members of different classes, races, and genders. Increasingly, political elites had to earn the respect of common whites rather than receive unquestioned deference. The Revolution dealt slavery a decisive blow in the North, greatly enlarged the numbers of free blacks, and extended important political rights to free African-Americans. Even elite white males publicly acknowledged the wartime contributions of
white women, implying that gender relations could become a subject of national debate. By occupying lands sought by whites, Native Americans posed the most serious challenge of all to Revolutionary notions of liberty and equality.

**Egalitarianism Among White Males**

For much of the eighteenth century, social relations between elites and other white colonists became more formal, distant, and restrained (see Chapter 4). Members of the colonial gentry emphasized their social position by living far beyond the means of ordinary families. By the late 1760s, however, many in the upper classes began wearing homespun rather than imported English clothes in order to win popular political approval, especially by showing their support for the colonial boycott of British goods. When Virginia planters organized minutemen companies in 1775, they put aside their expensive officer’s uniforms and dressed in buckskin or homespun hunting shirts of a sort that even the poorest farmer could afford. By 1776 the anti-British movement had persuaded many elites to maintain the appearance, if not the substance, of equality with common people.

Then came war, which accelerated the erosion of class differences by forcing the gentry, who held officers’ rank, to show respect to the ordinary folk serving as privates. Indeed, the soldiers demanded to be treated with consideration, especially in light of the ringing words of the Declaration of Independence, “All men are created equal.” The soldiers would follow commands, but not if they were addressed as inferiors.

The best officers realized this fact immediately. Some, among them General Israel Putnam of Connecticut, went out of their way to show that they felt no superiority to their troops. While inspecting a regiment digging fortifications around Boston in 1776, Putnam saw a large stone nearby and told a noncommissioned officer to throw it onto the outer wall. The individual protested, “Sir, I am a corporal.” “Oh,” replied Putnam, “I ask your pardon, sir.” The general then dismounted his horse and hurled the rock himself, to the immense delight of the troops working there.

Over the course of the war, common soldiers came to expect that their officers would recognize their worth as individuals. After returning to civilian life, the soldiers retained their sense of self-esteem and insisted on respectful treatment by elites. As these feelings of personal pride gradually translated into political behavior and beliefs, many candidates took care not to scorn the common people. The war thus subtly but fundamentally democratized Americans’ political assumptions.

The gentry’s sense of social rank also diminished as elites met men who rose through ability rather than through advantages of wealth or family. The war produced numerous examples like James Purvis, the illiterate son of a nonslaveholding Virginia farmer, who joined the First Virginia Regiment as a private in 1775, soon rose to sergeant, and then taught himself to read and write so that he could perform an officer’s duties. Captain Purvis fought through the entire war and impressed his well-born officers as “an uneducated man, but of sterling worth.” As elites saw more and more men like Purvis performing responsibilities previously thought to be above their station in life, many came to recognize that a person’s merit was not always related to his wealth.

Not all those who considered themselves republicans welcomed the apparent trend toward democracy. Especially among elites, many continued to insist that each social class had its own particular virtues and that a chief virtue of the lower classes was deference to those possessing the wealth and education necessary to govern. Writing to John Adams in 1778, Mercy Otis Warren observed that while “a state of war has ever been deemed unfavorable to virtue, . . . such a total change of manners in so short a period . . . was never known in the history of man. Rapacity and profusion, pride and servility, and almost every vice is contrasted in the same heart.”

Nevertheless, most Revolutionary-generation Americans came to insist that virtue and sacrifice defined a citizen’s worth independently of his wealth. Voters began to view members of the “natural aristocracy”—those who had demonstrated fitness for government service by personal accomplishments—as the ideal candidates for political office. This natural aristocracy had room for a few self-made men such as Benjamin Franklin, as well as for those, like Thomas Jefferson and John Hancock, who were born into wealth. Voters still elected the wealthy to office, but not if they flaunted their money or were condescending toward common people. The new emphasis on equality did not extend to propertyless males, women, and nonwhites, but it undermined the tendency to believe that wealth or distinguished family background conferred a special claim to public office.

Although many whites became more egalitarian, the Revolution left the overall distribution of wealth in the nation unchanged. Because the 3 percent of Americans
who fled abroad as loyalists represented a cross-section of society, their departure left the new nation’s class structure unaltered. Loyalists’ confiscated estates tended to be bought up by equally well-to-do Whig gentlemen. Overall, the American upper class seems to have owned about as much of the national wealth in 1783 as it did in 1776.

A Revolution for Black Americans

The wartime situation of African-Americans contradicted the ideals of equality and justice for which Americans were fighting. About five hundred thousand black persons—20 percent of the total population—inhabited the United States in 1776, of whom all but about twenty-five thousand lived in bondage. Even those who were free could not vote, lived under curfews and other galling restrictions, and lacked the guarantees of equal justice held by the poorest white criminal. Free blacks could expect no more than grudging toleration, and few slaves ever gained their freedom.

Although the United States was a “white man’s country” in 1776, the war opened some opportunities for African-Americans. Among the thousands of slaves, among them Jehu Grant of Rhode Island, ran off and posed as free persons. Grant later recalled his excitement “when I saw liberty poles and the people all engaged for the support of freedom, and I could not but like and be pleased with such a thing.”

In contrast to the twenty-five thousand who joined British forces, approximately five thousand African-Americans, most from the North, served in the Continental forces. Even though the army forbade enlistment by African-Americans in 1775, black soldiers were already fighting in units during the siege of Boston, and the ban on black enlistments started to collapse in 1777. The majority were free blacks, but some were slaves serving with their masters’ consent.

For the most part, these wartime opportunities for African-American men grew out of the army’s need for personnel rather than a white commitment to equal justice. In fact, until the mid-eighteenth century, few Europeans and white Americans had criticized slavery at all. Like disease and sin, slavery was considered part of the natural order. But in the decade before the Revolution, American opposition to slavery had swelled, especially as resistance leaders increasingly compared the colonies’ relationship with Britain to that between slaves and a master. The first American prohibition against slave owning came from the yearly meeting of the New England Quakers in 1770. The yearly meetings of New York and Philadelphia Quakers followed suit in 1776, and by 1779 Quaker slave owners had freed 80 percent of their slaves.

Although the Quakers aimed mainly to abolish slaveholding within their own ranks, the Declaration of Independence’s broad assertion of natural rights and human equality spurred a more general attack on the institution of slavery. Between 1777 and 1784 Vermont, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut began phasing out slavery. New York did not do so until 1799, and New Jersey until 1804. New Hampshire, unmoved by petitions like that written in 1779 by Portsmouth slaves demanding liberty “to dispose of our lives, freedom, and property,” never freed its slaves; but by 1810 none remained in the state.

The Revolutionary generation, rather than immediately abolishing slavery, took steps that would weaken the institution and in this way bring about its eventual demise. Most state abolition laws provided for gradual emancipation, typically declaring all children born of a slave woman after a certain date—often July 4—free. (They still had to work, without pay, for their mother’s master for up to twenty-eight years.) Furthermore, the Revolution’s leaders did not press for decisive action against slavery in the South out of fear that widespread southern emancipation would either bankrupt or end the Union. They argued that the Confederation, already deeply in debt as a result of the war, could not finance immediate abolition in the South, and any attempt to do so without compensation would drive that region into secession.

Yet even in the South, where it was most firmly entrenched, slavery troubled some whites. When one of his slaves ran off to join the British and later was recaptured, James Madison of Virginia concluded that it would be hypocritical to punish the runaway “merely for coveting that liberty for which we have paid the price of so much blood.” Still, Madison did not free the slave, and no state south of Pennsylvania abolished slavery. Nevertheless, all states except South Carolina and Georgia ended slave imports and all but North Carolina passed laws making it easy for masters to manumit (set free) slaves. The number of free blacks in Virginia and Maryland had risen from about four thousand in 1775 to nearly twenty-one thousand, or about 5 percent of all African-Americans there, by 1790.

These “free persons of color” faced the future as destitute, second-class citizens. Most had purchased
their freedom by spending small cash savings earned in off-hours and were past their physical prime. Once free, they found whites reluctant to hire them or to pay equal wages. Black ship carpenters in Charleston (formerly Charles Town), South Carolina, for example, earned one-third less than their white coworkers in 1783. Under such circumstances, most free blacks remained poor laborers, domestic servants, and tenant farmers.

Even with these disadvantages, some free blacks became landowners or skilled artisans, and a few gained recognition from whites. One of the best known was Benjamin Banneker of Maryland, a self-taught mathematician and astronomer. In 1789 Banneker was one of three surveyors who laid out the new national capital in Washington, D.C., and after 1791 he published a series of widely read almanacs. Sending a copy of one to Thomas Jefferson, Banneker chided the future president for holding views of black inferiority that contradicted his own words in the Declaration of Independence. Another prominent African American was the Boston poet and slave Phillis Wheatley. Several of Wheatley’s poems explicitly linked the liberty sought by white Americans with a plea for the liberty of slaves, including one that was autobiographical:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’ed happy seat:

. . . . .

Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

Most states granted some civil rights to free blacks during and after the Revolution. Free blacks had not participated in colonial elections, but those who were male and met the property qualification gained this privilege in several states by the 1780s. Most northern states repealed or stopped enforcing curfews and other colonial laws restricting free African-Americans’ freedom of movement. These same states generally changed their laws to guarantee free blacks equal treatment in court hearings.

The Revolution neither ended slavery nor brought equality to free blacks, but it did begin a process by which slavery eventually could be extinguished. In half the nation, the end of human bondage was in sight. White southerners increasingly viewed slavery as a necessary evil—an attitude that implicitly recognized its immorality. Slavery had begun to crack, and free blacks had made some gains. But events in the 1790s would stall the move toward egalitarianism (see Chapter 7).

White Women in Wartime

“To be adept in the art of Government is a prerogative to which your sex lay almost exclusive claim,” wrote Abigail Adams to her husband John in 1776. She was one of the era’s shrewdest political commentators and her husband’s political confidante and best friend, but she had no public role. Indeed, the assumption that women were naturally dependent—either as children subordinate to their parents or as wives to their husbands—continued to dominate discussions of the female role. Nevertheless, the circumstances of war partially relaxed gender barriers and proved significant for some white American women.

White women’s support of colonial resistance before the Revolution (see Chapter 5) broadened into an even wider range of support activities during the war. Female “camp followers,” many of them soldiers’ wives, served military units on both sides by cooking, laundering, and nursing the wounded. A few female patriots, such as Massachusetts’ Deborah Sampson, even disguised themselves as men and joined in the fighting. But most
women remained at home, where they managed families, households, farms, and businesses on their own.

Yet even traditional roles took on new meaning in the absence of male household heads. After her civilian husband was seized by loyalists and turned over to the British on Long Island, Mary Silliman of Fairfield, Connecticut, tended to her four children (and bore a fifth), oversaw several servants and slaves, ran a commercial farm that had to be evacuated when the British attacked Fairfield, and launched repeated appeals for her husband’s release. Despite often enormous struggles, such experiences boosted white women’s confidence in their abilities to think and act on matters traditionally reserved for men. “I have the vanity,” wrote another Connecticut woman, Mary Fish, to a female friend, “to think I have in some measure acted the heroine as well as my dear Husband the Hero.”

As in all wars, women’s public roles and visibility were heightened during the Revolution. The question was to what extent the new Republic would make these gains permanent.

**Native Americans and the Revolution**

For Native Americans, the consequences of the United States’ triumph over Britain were even less certain. Whereas Revolutionary ideology held out at least an abstract hope for blacks, white women, and others seeking liberty and equal rights within American society, it made no provision for Indian nations that sought to maintain their political and cultural independence from Europeans and European-Americans. Moreover, in an overwhelmingly agrarian society like the United States, the Revolution’s implicit promise of equal economic opportunity for all male citizens set the stage for territorial expansion beyond the areas already settled, thereby threatening Native American landholdings. Even where Indians retained land, the influx of settlers posed dangers to them in the form of deadly diseases, farming practices inimical to Indian subsistence (see Chapter 3), and alcohol. Native Americans were all the more vulnerable because, during the three decades encompassed by the Seven Years’ War and the Revolution (1754–1783), the Native population east of the Mississippi had declined by about half, and many Indian communities had been uprooted.

In the face of these uncertainties, Native Americans continued their efforts to incorporate the most useful aspects of European culture into their own. From the beginning of the colonial period, Indians had selectively adopted European-made goods of cloth, metal, glass, and other materials into their lives. But Native Americans did not give up their older ways altogether; rather, their clothing, tools, weapons, utensils, and other material goods combined elements of the old and the new. Indians, especially those no longer resisting American expansion, also selectively participated in the American economy by occasionally working for wages or by selling food, crafts, or other products. This interweaving of the new with the traditional characterized Indian communities throughout eastern North America.

Native Americans, then, did not remain stubbornly rooted in traditional ways nor resist participation in a larger world dominated by whites. But they did insist on retaining control of their communities and their ways of life. In this spirit, the Chickasaws of the Mississippi valley addressed Congress in 1783. While asking “from
whore and whome we are to be supplied with neces-
saries,” they also requested that the Confederation
“put a stop to any encroachments on our lands, with-
out our consent, and silence those [white] People who . . . inflame and exasperate our Young Men.”

In the Revolution’s aftermath, it appeared doubtful that the new nation would concede even this much to Native Americans.

Forging New Governments, 1776–1787

Even as they joined in resisting Britain’s authority, white mainland colonists differed sharply among themselves over basic questions of social and political order. Many elite republicans welcomed hierarchical rule, so long as it was not based on heredity, and feared democracy as “mob rule.” Working and poor people, especially in cities, worried that propertied elites profited at their expense. Rural colonists emphasized decentralizing power and authority as much as possible. These conflicts were reflected in the independent United States’ first experiments in government at the state and national levels.

From Colonies to States

The state governments that Americans constructed during the Revolution magnified the prewar struggle between more-radical democratic elements and elites who would minimize popular participation. To a significant degree, the new state constitutions retained colonial precedents that favored the wealthiest elites.

In keeping with colonial practice, eleven of the thirteen states maintained bicameral legislatures. Colonial legislatures had consisted of two houses: an elected lower chamber (or assembly) and an upper chamber (or council) appointed by the governor or chosen by the assembly (see Chapter 4). These two-part legislatures mirrored Parliament’s division into the House of Commons and House of Lords, symbolizing the assumption that a government should have separate representation by the upper class and the common people.

Despite participation by people from all classes in the struggle against Britain, few questioned the longstanding practice of setting property requirements for voters and elected officials. In the prevailing view, only the ownership of property, especially land, made it possible for voters to think and act independently. Whereas tenant farmers and hired laborers might sell their votes, mindlessly follow a demagogue, or vote to avoid pleasing their landlords or employers, property holders supposedly had the financial means and the education to express their political preferences freely and responsibly. The association between property and citizenship was so deeply ingrained that even radicals such as Samuel Adams opposed allowing all males—much less women—to vote and hold office.

The notion that elected representatives should exercise independent judgment in leading the people rather than simply carry out the popular will also survived from the colonial period and limited democratization. Although Americans today take political parties for granted, the idea of parties as necessary instruments for identifying and mobilizing public opinion was alien to the eighteenth-century political temper, which equated parties with “factions”—selfish groups that advanced their own interests at the expense of liberty or the public good. Most candidates for office did not present voters with a clear choice between policies calculated to benefit rival interest groups; instead, they campaigned on the basis of their personal reputations and fitness for office. As a result, voters often did not know where office seekers stood on specific issues and hence found it hard to influence government actions.

Another colonial practice that persisted into the 1770s and 1780s was the equal (or nearly equal) division of legislative seats among all counties or towns, regardless of differences in population. Inasmuch as representation had never before been apportioned according to population, a minority of voters normally elected a majority of assemblymen. Only the most radical constitution, Pennsylvania’s, sought to avoid such outcomes by attempting to ensure that election districts would be roughly equal in population. Nine of the thirteen states reduced property requirements for voting, but none abolished such qualifications entirely, and most of the reductions were modest.

Yet the holdover of certain colonial-era practices should not obscure the pathbreaking components of the state constitutions. Above all, they were written documents whose adoption usually required popular ratification and that could be changed only if voters chose to amend them. In short, Americans jettisoned the British conception of a constitution as a body of customary arrangements and practices, insisting instead that constitutions were written compacts that defined and limited the powers of rulers. Moreover, as a final check on government power, the Revolutionary constitutions spelled out citizens’ fundamental rights. By 1784 all state constitutions included explicit bills of rights that outlined certain freedoms that lay beyond the control of any government.
Without intending to extend political participation, elites had found themselves pulled in a democratic direction by the logic of the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s. Elite-dominated but popularly elected assemblies had led the fight against royal governors and their appointees—the executive branch of colonial governments—who had repeatedly enforced laws and policies deemed dangerous to liberty. Colonists entered the Revolution dreading executive officeholders and convinced that even elected governors could no more be trusted with power than could monarchs. Recent history seemed to confirm the message hammered home by British “country party” ideology (see Chapter 5) that those in power tended to become either corrupt or dictatorial. Consequently, Revolutionary statesmen proclaimed the need to strengthen legislatures at the governors’ expense.

Accordingly, the earliest state constitutions severely limited executive power. In most states the governor became an elected official, and elections themselves occurred far more frequently. (Pennsylvania actually eliminated the office of governor altogether.) Whereas most colonial elections had been called at the governor’s pleasure, after 1776 all states scheduled annual elections except South Carolina, which held them every two years. In most states the power of appointments was transferred from the governor to the legislature. Legislatures usually appointed judges and could reduce their salaries or impeach them (try them for wrongdoing). By relieving governors of most appointive powers, denying them the right to veto laws, and making them subject to impeachment, the constitutions turned governors into figureheads who simply chaired executive councils that made militia appointments and supervised financial business.

As the new state constitutions weakened the executive branch and vested more power in the legislatures, they also made the legislatures more responsive to the will of the people. Nowhere could the governor appoint the upper chamber. Eight constitutions written before 1780 allowed voters to select both houses of the legislature; one (Maryland) used a popularly chosen “electoral college” for its upper house; and the remaining “senates” were filled by vote of their assemblies. Pennsylvania and Georgia abolished the upper house and substituted a unicameral (single-chamber) legislature. American assaults on the executive branch and enhancement of legislative authority reflected bitter memories of royal governors who had acted arbitrarily to dismiss assemblies and control government through their power of appointment, and fear that republics’ undoing began with executive usurpation of authority.

Despite their high regard for popularly elected legislatures, Revolutionary leaders described themselves as republicans rather than democrats. Although used interchangeably today, these words had different connotations in the eighteenth century. At worst, democracy suggested mob rule; at best, it implied the concentration of power in the hands of an uneducated multitude. In contrast, republicanism presumed that government would be entrusted to capable leaders elected for their superior talents and wisdom. For most republicans, the ideal government would delicately balance the interests of different classes to prevent any one group from gaining absolute power. Some, including John Adams, thought that a republic could include a hereditary aristocracy or even a monarchy as part of this balance, but most thought otherwise. Having blasted one king in the Declaration of Independence, most political leaders had no desire to enthrone another. Still, their rejection of hereditary aristocracy and monarchy posed a problem for republicans trying to reconcile their preference for strong, elite leadership with most Americans’ pervasive distrust of executive power.

In the first flush of revolutionary enthusiasm, elites had to content themselves with state governments dominated by popularly elected legislatures. Gradually, however, wealthier landowners, bankers, merchants, and lawyers reasserted their desires for centralized authority and the political prerogatives of wealth. In Massachusetts an elite-dominated convention in 1780 pushed through a constitution stipulating stiff property qualifications for voting and holding office, state senate districts that were apportioned according to property values, and a governor with considerable powers in making appointments and vetoing legislative measures. The Massachusetts constitution signaled a general trend. Georgia and Pennsylvania substituted bicameral for unicameral legislatures by 1790. Other states raised property qualifications for members of the upper chamber in a bid to encourage the “senatorial element” and to make room for men of “Wisdom, remarkable integrity, or that Weight which arises from property.”

The later state constitutions revealed a central feature of elites’ thought. Gradations among social classes and restrictions on the expression of popular will troubled them far less than the prospect of tyranny by those in power. But some republican elites believed that social divisions, if deep-seated and permanent, could jeopardize liberty, and attempted to prevent such an outcome through legislation. In 1776 in Virginia, for example, Thomas Jefferson persuaded the legislature to abolish entail, legal requirements that prevented an heir and all his descendants from selling or dividing an estate.
Although entails were easy to break through special laws—Jefferson himself had escaped the constraints of one—he hoped that their elimination would strip wealthy families of the opportunity to amass land continuously and become an overbearing aristocracy. Through Jefferson's efforts, Virginia also ended primogeniture, the legal requirement that the eldest son inherit all a family's property in the absence of a will. Jefferson hoped that these laws would ensure a continuous division of wealth. By 1791 no state provided for primogeniture, and only two still allowed entails.

These years also witnessed the end of state-established churches in most of the country. The exceptions were New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, where the Congregational church continued to collect tithes (church taxes) from citizens not belonging to recognized Christian denominations into the nineteenth century. Wherever colonial taxpayers had supported the Church of England, independent states abolished such support by 1786. Thomas Jefferson best expressed the ideal behind disestablishment in his Statute for Religious Freedom (1786), whose preamble resounded with a defense of religious freedom at all times and places. “Truth is great,” proclaimed Jefferson, “and will prevail if left to itself.”

The American Revolution, wrote Thomas Paine in 1782, was intended to ring in “a new era and give a new turn to human affairs.” This was an ambitious declaration and seemed to conflict with the states' retention of institutions such as state senates and property requirements for voting. But Paine's point was that all political institutions, new and old alike, now were being judged by the standard of whether they served the public good rather than the interests of the powerful few. More than any single innovation of the era, it was this new way of thinking that made American politics revolutionary.

Formalizing a Confederation, 1776-1781

As did their revolt against Britain and their early state constitutions, Americans' first national government reflected widespread fears of centralized authority and its potential for corruption. In 1776 John Dickinson, who had stayed in Congress despite having refused to sign the Declaration of Independence, drafted a proposal for a national constitution. Congress adopted a weakened version of Dickinson's proposal, called the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union (see Appendix), and sent it to the states for ratification in 1777.

The Articles of Confederation explicitly reserved to each state “its sovereignty, freedom and independence” and established a form of government in which Americans were citizens of their own states first and of the United States second. As John Adams later explained, the Whigs of 1776 never thought of “consolidating this vast Continent under one national Government” but instead erected “a Confederacy of States, each of which must have a separate government.”

Under the Articles, the national government consisted of a single-chamber Congress, elected by the state legislatures, in which each state had one vote. Congress could request funds from the states but could enact no tax of its own without every state's approval, nor could it regulate interstate or overseas commerce. The Articles did not provide for an executive branch. Rather, congressional committees oversaw financial, diplomatic, and military affairs. Nor was there a judicial system by which the national government could compel allegiance to its laws.

By 1781 all thirteen state legislatures had ratified the Articles, and the Confederation was in place. The new nation had taken a critical step in defining the role of national sovereignty in relation to the sovereignty of the individual states. Whereas the Continental Congress had directed most of the war effort without defined powers, the nation now had a formal government. Nevertheless, many Americans' misgivings about centralized power left the Confederation severely limited in the views of more nationally minded elites.

Finance, Trade, and the Economy, 1781-1786

For proponents of a strong national government, the greatest challenge facing the Confederation was putting the nation on a sound financial footing. Winning the war had cost the nation's six hundred thousand taxpayers a staggering $160 million, a sum that exceeded by 2,400 percent the taxes raised to pay for the Seven Years' War. To finance the War for Independence, which cost far more than could be immediately collected through taxation, the government borrowed funds from abroad and printed its own paper money, called Continentals. Lack of public faith in the government destroyed 98 percent of the value of the Continentals from 1776 to 1781, an inflationary disaster that gave rise to the expression “not worth a Continental.”

In 1781, seeking to overcome the national government's financial weakness, Congress appointed a wealthy, self-made Philadelphia merchant, Robert Morris, as the
nation’s superintendent of finance. Morris proposed that the states authorize the collection of a national import duty of 5 percent, which would finance the congressional budget and guarantee interest payments on the war debt. Because the Articles stipulated that every state had to approve the levying of national taxes, the import duty failed to pass in 1782 when Rhode Island alone rejected it.

Meanwhile, seeing themselves as sovereign, most states had assumed some responsibility for the war debt and begun compensating veterans and creditors within their borders. But Morris and other nationally minded elites insisted that the United States needed sources of revenue independent of the states in order to establish its credit-worthiness, enabling it to attract capital, and to establish a strong national government. Hoping to panic the country into seeing things their way, Morris and New York Congressman Alexander Hamilton engineered a dangerous gamble known later as the Newburgh Conspiracy. In 1783 the two men secretly persuaded some army officers, then encamped at Newburgh, New York, to threaten a coup d’état unless the treasury obtained the taxation authority needed to raise their pay, which was months in arrears. But George Washington, learning of the conspiracy before it was carried out, ended the plot by delivering a speech that appealed to his officers’ honor and left them unwilling to proceed. Although Morris may never have intended for a coup to actually occur, his willingness to take such a risk demonstrated the new nation’s perilous financial straits and the vulnerability of its political institutions.

When peace came in 1783, Congress sent another tax measure to the states, but once again a single legislature, this time New York’s, blocked it. From then on, the states steadily decreased their contributions to Congress. By the late 1780s, the states had fallen behind nearly 80 percent in providing the funds that Congress requested to operate the government and honor the national debt.

Nor did the Confederation succeed in prying trade concessions from Britain. Before independence, almost 60 percent of northern exports had gone to the West Indies, and New England’s maritime community had employed approximately 15 percent of the region’s adult males. After declaring the colonies in rebellion, Britain had virtually halted American trade with its Caribbean colonies and Great Britain itself (see Chapter 5). Because half of all American exports went to Great Britain and its colonies, these restrictions enabled British shippers to increase their share of Atlantic trade at American expense.

The decline in trade with Britain contributed substantially to an economic depression that gripped parts of the nation beginning in 1784. New Englanders were the least fortunate. A short growing season and poor soil kept yields so low, even in the best of times, that farmers barely produced enough grain for local consumption. New Englanders also faced both high taxes to repay the money borrowed to finance the Revolution and a tightening of credit that spawned countless lawsuits against debtors. Economic depression only aggravated the region’s chronic overpopulation. Young New England men continued to migrate to more remote lands or to cities; their discontent and restless mobility loosened the bonds of parental authority and left many women without marriage prospects.

British restrictions against trading with the West Indies fell especially hard on New England. Resourceful captains took cargoes to the French West Indies, Scandinavia, and China. Some even smuggled foodstuffs to the British West Indies under the very nose of the Royal Navy. Nevertheless, by 1791 discriminatory British treatment had reduced the number of seamen in the Massachusetts cod and whale fisheries by 42 percent compared to the 1770s.

The mid-Atlantic states, on the other hand, were less dependent on British-controlled markets for their exports. As famine stalked Europe, farmers in Pennsylvania and New York prospered from climbing export prices—much as Thomas Paine had predicted (see Chapter 5). By 1788 the region had largely recovered from the Revolution’s ravages.

Southern planters faced frustration at the failure of their principal crops, tobacco and rice, to return to prewar export levels. Whereas nearly two-thirds of American exports originated in the South in 1770, less than half were produced by southern states in 1790. In an effort to stay afloat, many Chesapeake tobacco growers shifted to wheat, and others expanded their production of hemp. But these changes had little effect on the region’s exports and, because wheat and hemp required fewer laborers than tobacco, left slave owners with a large amount of underemployed, restless “human property.” These factors, along with Native American and Spanish resistance to westward expansion, reinforced nagging uncertainties about the South’s future.

The Confederation and the West, 1785–1787

After winning the war against Britain, one of the most formidable challenges confronting the Confederation
was the postwar settlement and administration of western lands. White American settlers and speculators were determined to possess these lands, and Native Americans were just as determined to keep them out. At the same time, Britain and Spain supported the Indian nations in the hope of strengthening their own positions in North America.

After the states surrendered claims to more than 160 million acres north of the Ohio River, forming the Northwest Territory, Congress established uniform procedures for surveying this land in the Ordinance of 1785. The law established a township six miles square as the basic unit of settlement. Every township would be subdivided into thirty-six sections of 640 acres each, one of which would be reserved as a source of income for schools. The Ordinance imposed an arbitrary grid of straight lines and right angles across the landscape that conformed to European-American notions of private property while utterly ignoring the land’s natural features. Subsequently, in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Congress defined the steps for the creation and admission of new states. This law designated the area north of the Ohio River as the Northwest Territory and provided for its later division into states. It forbade slavery while the region remained a territory, although the citizens could legalize the institution after statehood.

The Northwest Ordinance outlined three stages for admitting states into the Union. First, during the initial years of settlement, Congress would appoint a territorial governor and judges. Second, as soon as five thousand adult males lived in a territory, voters would approve a temporary constitution and elect a legislature that would pass the territory's laws. Third, when the total population reached sixty thousand, voters would ratify a state constitution, which Congress would have to approve before granting statehood.

The Northwest Ordinance had a lasting effect on later American history. Besides laying out procedures for settling and establishing governments in the Northwest, they later served as models for organizing territories farther west.
Northwest Ordinance also established a significant precedent for banning slavery from certain territories. But because Native Americans, who were determined to keep out Confederation immigrants, controlled virtually the entire region north of the Ohio River, the ordinances could not be implemented immediately.

The Northwest Territory seemed to offer enough rich land to guarantee future citizens landownership for centuries. This fact satisfied American republicans who feared that the rapidly growing white population would quickly exhaust available land east of the Appalachians and so create a large class of tenants and poor laborers who would lack the property needed to vote. By poisoning politics through class conflict, such a development would undermine the equality among whites that republicans thought essential for a healthy nation.

The realization of these republican dreams was by no means inevitable. Most “available” territory from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River belonged to those peoples whom the Declaration of Independence had condemned as “merciless Indian savages.” Divided into more than eighty tribes and numbering perhaps 150,000 people in 1789, these Native Americans were struggling to preserve their own independence. At postwar treaty negotiations, they repeatedly heard Confederation commissioners scornfully declare, “You are a subdued people . . . we claim the country by conquest.”

Under threats of continued warfare, some northwestern Indian leaders initially gave in. The Iroquois, who had suffered heavily during the war, lost about half their land in New York and Pennsylvania in the second Treaty of Fort Stanwix (1784). In the treaties of Fort McIntosh (1785) and Fort Finney (1786), Delaware and Shawnee leaders, respectively, were obliged to recognize American sovereignty over their lands. But most Indians reacted with outrage and repudiated these treaties on the grounds that their negotiators lacked the authority to give up territory without their nations’ express approval.

Native Americans’ resistance to Confederation encroachments also stemmed from their confidence that the British—still a presence in the West—would provide the arms and ammunition they needed to defy the United States. Britain had refused to abandon seven
northwestern forts within the new nation's boundaries, citing certain states' failure to compensate loyalists for confiscated property and to honor prewar debts owed by citizens. But even before Britain knew about these violations of the peace treaty, its colonial office had secretly ordered the governor of Canada to hold the forts. With Indian support, Britain hoped eventually to reclaim "Ohio country" lands that now lay within the Northwest Territory. The British strengthened their presence in the region by encouraging Canadian traders to exchange cloth, tools, and arms with Native peoples for furs.

The Mohawk Joseph Brant emerged as the initial inspiration behind Indian resistance in the Northwest. Courageous in battle, skillful in diplomacy, and highly educated (he had translated an Anglican prayer book and the Gospel of Mark into Mohawk), Brant became a minor celebrity when he visited King George in London in 1785. At British-held Fort Detroit in 1786, he helped organize the northwestern Indians into a military alliance to exclude Confederation citizens north of the Ohio River. But Brant and his Mohawks, who had relocated beyond American reach in Canada, could not win support from Senecas and other Iroquois who had chosen to remain in New York, where they now lived in peace with their white neighbors. Nor could he count on the support of the Ohio Indians, who had been betrayed by the Iroquois on numerous occasions in the past (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Seizing on disunity within Indian ranks, Kentuckians and others organized militia raids into the Northwest Territory. These raids gradually forced the Miamis, Shawnees, and Delawares to evacuate southern Indiana and Ohio. The Indians' withdrawal northward, toward the Great Lakes, soon tempted whites to make their first settlements in what is now Ohio. In spring 1788 about fifty New Englanders sailed down the Ohio River in a bulletproof barge named *Mayflower* and founded the town of Marietta. That same year some Pennsylvanians and New Jerseyites established a second community north of the Ohio on the site of modern-day Cincinnati. By then the contest for the Ohio valley was nearing a decisive stage.

The Confederation confronted similar challenges in the Southeast, where Spain and its Indian allies took steps to prevent American settlers from occupying their lands. The Spanish found a brilliant ally in the Creek leader Alexander McGillivray. In some fraudulent treaties, two Creeks had surrendered extensive territory to Georgia that McGillivray intended to regain. Patiently holding back his followers for three years, McGillivray negotiated a secret treaty in which Spain promised weapons so that the Creeks could protect themselves "from the Bears and other fierce Animals." When the Creeks finally attacked in 1786, they shrewdly expelled only those whites occupying disputed lands and then offered Georgia a cease-fire. Eager to avoid voting taxes for a costly war, Georgia politicians let the Creeks keep the land.

Spain also sought to prevent American infiltration by denying western settlers permission to ship their crops down the Mississippi River to New Orleans.
Having negotiated a separate treaty with Britain (see above), Spain had not signed the Peace of Paris, by which Britain promised the United States export rights down the Mississippi, and in 1784 the Spanish closed New Orleans to Anglo-American commerce. To negotiate trading privileges at New Orleans, the United States sent John Jay to Spain. Jay returned in 1786 with a treaty that opened up valuable Spanish markets to eastern merchants and renounced Spanish claims to disputed southwestern lands—at the cost, however, of relinquishing American export rights through New Orleans for another twenty years. Westerners and southerners charged that this Jay-Gardoqui Treaty sacrificed their interests to benefit northern commerce, and Congress rejected it.

**Toward a New Constitution, 1786–1788**

After six years under the Articles of Confederation, the United States had made enormous strides in establishing itself as an independent nation. But impatience with the national government’s limitations continued to grow among those seeking to establish the Republic on a more solid financial and military footing. Impatience turned to anxiety after Massachusetts farmers defied local authorities in protesting measures that would worsen their already severe economic circumstances. A national convention called to consider amendments to the Articles instead proposed a radical new frame of government, the Constitution. In 1788 the states ratified the Constitution, setting a new course for America.

**Shays’s Rebellion, 1786-1787**

The Jay-Gardoqui Treaty revealed deep-seated tensions that lay just beneath the surface appearance of American national unity. The depression that had begun in 1784 persisted in New England, which had never recovered from the loss of its prime export market in the British West Indies. With farmers already squeezed financially, the state legislature, dominated by commercially minded elites, voted early in 1786 to pay off its Revolutionary debt in three years. This ill-considered policy necessitated a huge tax hike. Meanwhile, the state’s unfavorable balance of payments with Britain had produced a shortage of specie (gold and silver coin) because British creditors refused any other currency. Fearing a flood of worthless paper notes, Massachusetts bankers and merchants insisted that they, too, be paid in specie, while the state mandated the same for payment of taxes. Lowest in this cycle of debt were thousands of small family farmers.

In contrast, the mid-Atlantic and southern states were emerging from the depression, thanks to rising tobacco and food exports to Europe. Taxpayers in these sections, moreover, were paying off war debts easily, and most were indifferent to national politics.

Despite the nation’s prosperity outside New England, a growing minority of nationalists was dissatisfied
with the Confederation. Merchants and shippers wanted a central government powerful enough to secure trading privileges for them abroad, and to ensure economic stability and America's standing in the Atlantic economy, still dominated by Britain. Land speculators and western settlers, on the other hand, preferred a government that would pursue a more activist policy against Spain, Britain, and Native Americans in the West. Meanwhile, urban artisans hoped for a stronger national government that would impose a uniformly high tariff and thereby protect them from foreign competition.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the spark that ignited this tinderbox originated in Massachusetts. The plight of that state's farmers was especially severe in the western part of the state, where agriculture was least profitable. Facing demands that they pay their debts and taxes in hard currency, which few of them had in abundance if at all, farmers held public meetings. As in similar meetings more than a decade earlier, they discussed "the Suppressing of tyrannical government;" referring this time to the Massachusetts government rather than the British. In 1786 in a move reminiscent of pre-Revolutionary back-country dissidents (see Chapter 5), farmer and former Revolutionary War officer Daniel Shays led two thousand angry men in an attempt to shut down the courts in three western counties. The Shaysites hoped thereby to stop sheriffs' auctions for unpaid taxes and prevent foreclosures on farm mortgages. Although routed by state troops after several skirmishes, sympathizers of Shays won control of the Massachusetts legislature in 1787, cut taxes, and secured a pardon for their leader.

The Shaysites had limited objectives, were dispersed with relatively little bloodshed, and never seriously threatened anarchy. But their uprising, and similar but less militant movements in other states, became the rallying cry for advocates of a stronger central government. By threatening to seize weapons from a federal arsenal at Springfield, Massachusetts, the farmers' movement unintentionally enabled nationalists to argue that the United States had become vulnerable to "mobocracy." Writing to Henry Knox for news from Massachusetts, an anxious George Washington worried that "there are combustibles in every state, which a spark might set fire to," destroying the Republic. Meanwhile, rumors were flying that the Spanish had offered export rights at New Orleans to westerners if they would secede from the Union. Nationalists sowed fears that the United States was on the verge of coming apart.

Instead of igniting a popular uprising, as Washington feared, Shays's Rebellion sparked aggressive nationalists into pushing for a wholesale reform of the Republic's legal and institutional structure. Shortly before the outbreak of the rebellion, delegates from five states had assembled at Annapolis, Maryland. They had intended to discuss means of promoting interstate commerce but instead called for a general convention to propose amendments to the Articles of Confederation. Accepting their suggestion, Congress asked the states to appoint delegations to meet in Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia Convention, 1787

In May 1787 fifty-five delegates from every state but Rhode Island began gathering at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia, later known as Independence Hall. Among them were established figures like George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, as well as talented newcomers such as Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. Most were wealthy and in their thirties or forties, and nineteen owned slaves. More than half had legal training.

The convention immediately closed its sessions to the press and the public, kept no official journal, and even appointed chaperones to accompany the aged and talkative Franklin to dinner parties lest he disclose details of what was happening. Although these measures opened the members of the convention to the charge of acting undemocratically and conspiratorially, the delegates thought secrecy essential to ensure freedom of debate without fear of criticism from home.

The delegates shared a "continental" or "nationalist" perspective, instilled through their extended involvement with the national government. Thirty-nine had sat in Congress, where they had seen the Confederation's weaknesses firsthand. In the postwar years, they had become convinced that unless the national government was freed from the control of more popularly and locally oriented state legislatures, the country would fall victim to foreign aggression or simply disintegrate.

The convention faced two basic issues. The first was whether to tinker with the Articles of Confederation, as the state legislatures had formally instructed the delegates to do, or to replace the Articles altogether with a new constitution that gave more power to the national government. The second fundamental question was how to balance the conflicting interests of large and small states. James Madison of Virginia, who had entered Congress in 1780 at twenty-nine, proposed an answer to each issue. Despite his youth and almost frail build, Madison commanded enormous respect for his
profound knowledge of history and the passionate intensity he brought to debates.

Madison’s Virginia Plan, introduced in late May, boldly called for the establishment of a strong central government rather than a federation of states. Madison’s blueprint gave Congress virtually unrestricted rights of legislation and taxation, the power to veto any state law, and authority to use military force against the states. As one delegate immediately saw, the Virginia Plan was designed “to abolish the State Governor[s] altogether.” The Virginia Plan specified a bicameral legislature and fixed representation in both houses of Congress proportionally to each state’s population. The voters would elect the lower house, which would then choose delegates to the upper chamber from nominations submitted by the legislatures. Both houses would jointly name the country’s president and judges.

Madison’s scheme aroused immediate opposition, however, especially his call for state representation according to population—a provision highly favorable to his own Virginia. On June 15 William Paterson of New Jersey offered a counterproposal, the so-called New Jersey Plan, which recommended a single-chamber congress in which each state had an equal vote, just as under the Articles.

The two plans exposed the convention’s great stumbling block: the question of representation. The Virginia Plan would have given the four largest states a majority in both houses. The New Jersey Plan would have allowed the seven smallest states, which included just 25 percent of all Americans, to control Congress. By July 2 the convention had arrived “at a full stop,” as one delegate put it. To end the impasse, the delegates assigned a member from each state to a “grand committee” dedicated to compromise. The panel adopted a proposal offered earlier by the Connecticut delegation: an equal vote for each state in the upper house and proportional voting in the lower house. Madison and the Virginians doggedly fought this so-called Connecticut Compromise, but they were voted down on July 17.

Despite their differences over representation, Paterson’s and Madison’s proposals alike would have strengthened the national government at the states’ expense. No less than Madison, Paterson wished to empower Congress to raise taxes, regulate interstate commerce, and use military force against the states. The New Jersey Plan, in fact, defined congressional laws and treaties as the “supreme law of the land” and would also have established courts to force reluctant states to accept these measures. But other delegates were wary of undermining the sovereignty of the states altogether. Out of hard bargaining emerged the Constitution’s delicate balance between the desire of nearly all delegates for a stronger national government and their fear that governments tended to grow despotic.

As finally approved on September 17, 1787, the Constitution of the United States (see Appendix) was an extraordinary document, and not merely because it reconciled the conflicting interests of the large and small states. The new frame of government augmented national authority in several ways. Although it did not incorporate Madison’s proposal to give Congress a veto over state laws, it vested in Congress the authority to lay and collect taxes, to regulate interstate commerce, and to conduct diplomacy. States could no longer coin money, interfere with contracts and debts, or tax interstate commerce. Following the New Jersey Plan, all acts and treaties of the United States became “the supreme law of the land.” All state officials had to swear to uphold the Constitution, even against acts of their own states. The national government could use military force
against any state. These provisions added up to a complete abandonment of the principle on which the Articles of Confederation had rested: that the United States was a federation of states, with ultimate authority concentrated in their legislatures.

To allay the concerns of more moderate delegates, the Constitution’s framers devised two means of restraining the power of the new central government. First, in keeping with republican political theory, they established three distinct branches—executive, legislative, and judicial—within the national government; and second, they designed a system of checks and balances to prevent any one branch from dominating the other two. The framers systematically applied to the national government the principle of a functional separation of powers, as it had been evolving in the states since about 1780. In the bicameral Congress, states’ equal representation in the Senate was offset by the proportional representation, by population, in the House; and each chamber could block measures approved by the other. Furthermore, where the state constitutions had deliberately weakened the executive, the Constitution gave the president the power to veto acts of Congress; but to prevent capricious use of the veto, Congress could override the president by a two-thirds majority in each house. The president could conduct diplomacy, but only the Senate could ratify treaties. The president named his cabinet, but only with Senate approval. The president and all his appointees could be removed from office by a joint vote of Congress, but only for “high crimes,” not for political disagreements.

To further ensure the independence of each branch, the Constitution provided that the members of one branch would not choose those of another, except for judges, whose independence was protected by lifetime appointment. For example, the president was to be selected by an electoral college, whose members the states would select as their legislatures saw fit. The state legislatures also elected the members of the Senate, whereas the election of delegates to the House of Representatives was achieved by direct popular vote.

In addition to checks and balances, the founders devised a system of shared power and dual lawmaking by the national and state governments—“federalism”—in order to place limits on central authority. Not only did the state legislatures have a key role in electing the president and senators, but the Constitution could be amended by the votes of three-fourths of the states. Thus, the convention departed sharply from Madison’s plan to establish a “consolidated” national government entirely independent of, and superior to, the states.

A key assumption behind federalism was that the national government would limit its activities to foreign affairs, national defense, regulating interstate commerce, and coining money. Most other political matters were left to the states. Regarding slavery in particular, each state retained full authority.

The dilemma confronting the Philadelphia convention centered not on whether slavery should be allowed in the new Republic but only on the much narrower question of whether slaves could be counted as persons when it came to determining a state’s representation at the national level. For most legal purposes, slaves were regarded not as persons but rather as the chattel property of their owners, meaning that they were on a par with other living property such as horses and cattle. But southern states saw their large numbers of slaves as a means of augmenting their numbers in the House of Representatives and in the electoral colleges that would elect the nation’s presidents every four years. So strengthened, they could prevent northerners from ever abolishing slavery.

Representing states that had begun ending slavery, northern delegates hesitated to give southern states a political advantage by allowing them to count people who had no civil or political rights. But as property owners themselves, northern delegates were also hesitant to question southern planters’ notions of property rights, no matter what form the property took. Southerners also played on northern fears of disunion. After Georgia and South Carolina threatened to secede if their demands were not met, northerners agreed to allow three-fifths of all slaves to be counted for congressional representation. “Great as the evil [of slavery] is,” Madison warned, “a dismemberment of the union would be worse.”

The Constitution also reinforced slavery in other ways. Most notably, it forbade citizens of any state, even those which had abolished slavery, to prevent the return of escaped slaves to another state. The Constitution limited slavery only to the extent of permitting Congress to ban the importation of slaves after 1808, and by not repudiating Congress’s earlier ban on slavery in the Northwest Territory.

Although leaving much authority to the states, the Constitution established a national government clearly superior to the states in several spheres, and it utterly abandoned the notion of a federation of virtually independent states. Having thus strengthened national authority, the convention had to face the issue of ratifi-
cation. For two reasons, it seemed unwise to submit the Constitution to state legislatures for ratification. First, the framers realized that the state legislatures would reject the Constitution, which shrank their power relative to the national government. Second, most of the framers repudiated the idea—implicit in ratification by state legislatures—that the states were the foundation of the new government. The opening words of the Constitution, “We the People of the United States,” underlined the delegates’ conviction that the government had to be based on the consent of the American people themselves, “the fountain of all power” in Madison’s words.

In the end, the Philadelphia convention provided for the Constitution’s ratification by special state conventions composed of delegates elected by the voters. Approval by only nine such conventions would put the new government in operation. Because any state refusing to ratify the Constitution would remain under the Articles, the possibility existed that the country might divide into two nations.

Under the Constitution the framers expected the nation’s “natural aristocracy” to continue exercising political leadership; but did they also intend to rein in the democratic currents set in motion by the Revolution? In one respect they did, by curtailing what most nationalists considered the excessive power of popularly elected state legislatures. But the Constitution made no attempt to control faction and disorder by suppressing liberty—a “remedy,” wrote Madison, that would be “worse than the disease.” The framers did provide for one crucial democratic element in the new government, the House of Representatives. Equally important, the Constitution recognized the American people as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. Moreover, by making the Constitution flexible and amendable (though not easily amendable) and by dividing political power among competing branches of government, the framers made it possible for the national government to be slowly democratized, in ways unforeseen in 1787, without turning into a tyranny of ideologues or temporary majorities. Madison eloquently expressed the founders’ intention of controlling the dangers inherent in any society:

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of external precautions.

**The Struggle over Ratification, 1787–1788**

The Constitution’s supporters began the campaign for ratification without significant national support. Most Americans had expected the Philadelphia convention to offer only limited amendments to the Articles of Confederation, and therefore hesitated to endorse a radical proposal to restructure the government. Undaunted, the Constitution’s friends moved decisively to marshal political support. In a clever stroke, they called themselves “Federalists,” a term implying that the Constitution would more nearly balance the relationship between the national and state governments, and thereby undermined the arguments of those hostile to a centralization of national authority.

The Constitution’s opponents commonly became known as “Antifederalists.” This negative-sounding title probably hurt them, for it did not convey the crux of their argument against the Constitution—that it was not “federalist” at all since it failed to balance the power of the national and state governments. By augmenting national authority, Antifederalists maintained, the Constitution would more nearly balance the relationship between the national and state governments, and thereby undermined the arguments of those hostile to a centralization of national authority.

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The Antifederalist arguments reflected a deep-seated Anglo-American suspicion of concentrated power, expressed from the time of the Stamp Act crisis through the War of Independence and during the framing of the first state constitutions and the Articles of Confederation. Unquestionably, the Constitution gave the national government unprecedented authority in an age when most writers on politics taught that the primary means of preventing despotism was to restrain the power of government officials. Compared to a distant national government, Antifederalists argued, state governments were far more responsive to the popular will. True, the framers had guarded against tyranny by preserving limited state powers and devising a system of checks and balances, but no one could be certain that the untried scheme would work. To Mercy Otis Warren, the proposed government was “of such motley mixture that its enemies cannot trace a feature of Democratick or Republican extract,” and one that would “have passed through the short period of its existence without
a name, had not Mr. [James] Wilson... suggested the happy epithet of a Federal Republic.” For all its checks and balances, in addition, the Constitution nowhere contained ironclad guarantees that the new government would protect the liberties of individuals or the states. The absence of a bill of rights made an Antifederalist of Madison’s nationalist ally and fellow Virginian George Mason, the author of the first such state bill in 1776.

Although the Antifederalists advanced some formidable arguments, they confronted a number of disadvantages in publicizing their cause. While Antifederalist ranks included prominent figures, among them Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and Mercy Otis Warren, the Federalists claimed most of the country’s wealthiest and most honored men. No Antifederalist had the stature of George Washington or Benjamin Franklin. Moreover, most American newspapers were pro-Constitution and did not hesitate to bias their reporting in favor of the Federalist cause. Finally, as state and local leaders, the Antifederalists lacked their opponents’ contacts and experience at the national level, acquired through service in the officer corps of the Continental Army or in Congress.

The Federalists’ advantages in funds and political organizing proved decisive. The Antifederalists failed to create a sense of urgency among their supporters, assuming incorrectly that a large majority would rally to them. Only one-quarter of the voters turned out to elect delegates to the state ratifying conventions, however, and most had been mobilized by Federalists.

Federalist delegates prevailed in eight conventions between December 1787 and May 1788, in all cases except one by margins of at least two-thirds. Such lopsided votes reflected the Federalists’ organizational skills and aggressiveness rather than the degree of popular support for the Constitution. Advocates of the new plan of government did indeed ram through approval in some states “before it can be digested or deliberately considered,” in the words of a Pennsylvania Antifederalist. Only Rhode Island and North Carolina rejected the Constitution and thus refused to join the new United States.

But unless Virginia and New York—two of the largest states—ratified, the new government would be fatally weakened. In both states (and elsewhere) Antifederalist sentiment ran high among small farmers, who saw the Constitution as a scheme favoring city dwellers and moneyed interests (see Map 6.6). Prominent political leaders in these two states who called for refusing ratification included New York Governor George Clinton and Virginia’s Richard Henry Lee, George Mason, Patrick Henry, and future president James Monroe.

The Constitution became the law of the land on June 21, 1788, when the ninth state, New Hampshire, ratified by the close vote of 57 to 47. At that moment debate was still under way in the Virginia convention. The Federalists won crucial support from the representatives of the Allegheny counties—modern West Virginia—who wanted a strong national government capable of ending Indian raids across the Ohio River. Western Virginians’ votes, combined with James Madison’s logic and growing support for the Constitution among tidewater planters, proved too much for Henry’s spellbinding oratory. On June 25 the Virginia delegates ratified by a narrow 53 percent majority.

The struggle was even closer and more hotly contested in New York. Antifederalists had solid control of the state convention and would probably have voted down the Constitution, but then news arrived of New Hampshire’s and Virginia’s ratifications. The Federalist forces, led by Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, spread rumors that if the convention voted to reject, pro-Federalist New York City and adjacent counties would secede from the state and join the Union alone, leaving upstate New York a landlocked enclave. When several Antifederalist delegates took alarm at this threat and switched sides, New York ratified on July 26 by a 30 to 27 vote.

So the Antifederalists went down in defeat, and they did not survive as a political movement. Yet they left an important legacy. At their insistence, the Virginia, New York, and Massachusetts conventions ratified the Constitution with the accompanying request that the new charter be amended to include a bill of rights protecting Americans’ basic freedoms. So widespread was the public demand for a bill of rights that it became an inevitable item on the new government’s agenda, even as the states were choosing members of Congress and as presidential electors were unanimously designating George Washington president of the United States.

Antifederalists’ objections in New York also stimulated a response in the form of one of the great classics of political thought, The Federalist, a series of eighty-five newspaper essays penned by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. The Federalist papers probably had little or no influence on voting in the New York State convention. Rather, their importance lay in articulating arguments for the Constitution that addressed Americans’ wide-ranging concerns about the
powers and limits of the new federal government, thereby shaping a new philosophy of government. The Constitution, insisted *The Federalist’s* authors, had a twofold purpose: first, to defend the minority’s rights against majority tyranny; and second, to prevent a stubborn minority from blocking well-considered measures that the majority believed necessary for the national interest. Critics, argued *The Federalist*, had no reason to fear that the Constitution would allow a single economic or regional interest to dominate. In the most profound essay in the series, *Federalist* No. 10, Madison rejected the Antifederalist argument that establishing a republic for a nation as large as the United States would unleash a chaotic contest for power and ultimately leave the majority exploited by a minority. “Extend the sphere,” Madison insisted, “and...you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens, ... [or will be able to] act in unison with each other.” The country’s very size and diversity would neutralize the attempts of factions to push unwise laws through Congress.

Madison’s analysis was far too optimistic, however. As the Antifederalists predicted, the Constitution afforded enormous scope for special interests to influence the government. The great challenge for Madison’s generation would be how to maintain a government that would provide equal benefits to all and at the same time accord special privileges to none.
CONCLUSION

The entry of North Carolina into the Union in late 1789 and of Rhode Island in May 1790 marked the final triumph of the uncertain nationalism born of the War for Independence. The devastating eight-year conflict swept up half of all men of military age and made casualties of one-fifth of these. Among whites, blacks, and Native Americans alike, the conflict was a civil war as well as a war for independence from Great Britain. The fighting also affected large numbers of civilians because it took place in America's cities, towns, and countryside, and because troops needed provisions and other forms of local support. Never before had so many Americans participated together in an event of such magnitude.

Winning the war proved to be only the first step in establishing a new American nation. Establishing new governments at the state and national levels was just as challenging, for Americans were deeply divided over how to strike a proper balance between power and liberty and between national and state sovereignty. For a decade, conflicts between competing political visions were played out in the protracted debates over several state constitutions and, most decisively, in the efforts to frame and ratify the new federal Constitution. The Constitution struck careful balances on these and many other questions and definitely limited democracy; but by locating sovereignty in the people it created a legal and institutional framework within which Americans could struggle to attain democracy. In that way its conception was a fundamental moment in the history of America's enduring vision.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

Readings

Colin G. Calloway, The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities (1995). A powerful set of case studies examining eight Indian communities from Canada to Florida and showing the variety of Native American experiences during and immediately after the Revolution.


Elizabeth A. Fenn, Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775–82 (2001). A pathbreaking study arguing for the importance of smallpox in shaping the Revolutionary War as well as Native American-European conflicts across the continent.


**WEBSITES**

Liberty! The American Revolution  
An elaborate site offering perspectives on major events from the Seven Years’ War to the adoption of the Bill of Rights and featuring dozens of links to related sites.

A Multitude of Amendments, Alterations, and Additions  
[http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/inde1.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/inde1.htm)  
A part of the site for Independence National Historical Park that examines the drafting and promulgating of three major founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution.

Religion and the Founding of the American Republic  
[http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/religion.html](http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/religion.html)  
Based on an exhibit at the Library of Congress, this site provides many insights on the relationship between religion and the Revolution and on church-state relations under the new state and national governments.

For additional works please consult the bibliography at the end of the book.