The Road to Independence:
Imperial Reforms and Constitutional Conflicts

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From John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, 13 February 1818

“But what do We mean by the American Revolution? Do We mean the American War? The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the Minds and Hearts of the People...

While the King, and all in Authority under him, were believed to govern, in Justice and Mercy according to the Laws and Constitutions derived to them from the God of Nature, and transmitted to them by their Ancestors- they thought themselves bound to pray for the King and Queen and all the Royal Family, and all the Authority under them, as Ministers ordained of God for their good. But when they Saw those Powers renouncing all the Principles of Authority, and bent up on the destruction of all the Securities of their Lives, Liberties and Properties, they thought it their Duty to pray for the Continental Congress and all the thirteen State Congresses, &c...

This radical Change in the Principles, Opinions Sentiments and Affection of the People, was the real American Revolution.”
Three analytic steps

• We will not engage in a narrative history with plenty of facts and dates. No Boston Massacre, no Paul Revere’s ride today.

• Also, we will focus relatively little in concrete persons, either founders (Washington, Adams, ...) or ordinary Americans.

• Instead, we will proceed to examine three analytic steps:

  1. What are the constitutional questions in the imperial crisis?

  2. What are the incentives and beliefs of each side of the dispute?

  3. What weight does contingency vs. structure have?
A recap (short)
A recap (long)
A recap (war)
A recap (before)
Incentives and divisions

• In particular, we want to also think from the perspective of the different British agents:


  2. Tories vs. Whigs.

• Colonials are also divided among themselves:

  1. Among the colonies: Virginia and Massachusetts vs. Pennsylvania and New York. Sometimes close to an actual war.

  2. Within the colonies: Tidewater vs. Appalachian.

• These divisions were closely related with original patterns of settlement.
The first global war

- These divisions come to the front as a consequence of the Seven Years War (a.k.a. as the French and Indian War, 1754-1763).

- Let us look at the maps of Europe and North America in 1754.

- Multipolar 18th century Europe.

- Three European powers in North America: Great Britain, France, and Spain.
• The Diplomatic Revolution of 1756: under the direction of Prince of Kaunitz-Rietberg, Austria switches allies from Great Britain to France.

• Prussia does the reverse (Convention of Westminster) and, to preempt a Franco-Austrian attack, Frederick the Great (r. 1740-1786) invades Saxony in the late summer of 1756 (Third Silesian War).

• War starts early in North America (French and Indian War, 1754-1763): Battle of Jumonville Glen.

• Part of a “Second One Hundred Years War” (1688-1815) between Great Britain and France for European hegemony.
Seven Years’ War: 1756-1763, II

• This round of the “Second One Hundred Years War” ends up in a “tie” in Europe and return to *status quo ante bellum*.

• However, there are deep structural changes that go mostly unnoticed at the time.

• Among those:
  1. It consolidates Prussia as a large continental power.
  2. It creates tensions within the French monarchy that will lead to the revolution in 1789.

• But the most crucial change is that thanks to William Pitt’s strategic vision, the Seven Years’ War should be considered the first world war: resounding British victories in Bengal and North America that catapult Britain to world superpower.
British plus Iroquois, Catawba, and Cherokee against French and Abenaki Mi’kmaq, Algonquin, Lenape, Ojibwa, Ottawa, Shawnee, and Wyandot.

Early French successes.

However, after Pitt comes to power, the British concentrate enough resources to reverse the situation.

End of French power in North America: Wolfe’s decisive victory in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham (September 13, 1759).

French and Spanish intervention in the Revolutionary War after 1777 will be a consequence of this conflict.
Je me souviens/ Que né sous le lys/ Je croîs sous la rose
“Remarkable. . . One of the most important books on the American Revolution published in this decade.” — The Dallas Morning News

BROTHERS AT ARMS

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE AND THE MEN OF FRANCE AND SPAIN WHO SAVED IT

LARRIE D. FERREIRO

PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST
The fiscal-military state

Raimondo, Count of Montecuccoli

For war, you need three things: 1. Money. 2. Money. 3. Money

- A fiscal-military state is a state capable of sustaining large-scale warfare through taxation and fiscal innovation, such as the creation of a national debt or credit-providing institutions.

- A fiscal-military state becomes imperative after the 1560-1660 military revolution brought by the development of effective portable firearms.

- British built a more capable fiscal-military state than its rivals.

- This was probably the secret of the British success in the “Second One Hundred Years War” (1688-1815).

- Why? Long vs. short-run reasons (1688, Norman rule, ...).
THE SINEWS OF POWER

War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783

JOHN BREWER
of the government's debts. In addition, government bonds were combined with a national lottery (Million Adventure). Life annuities were issued, as well as tontines. Short-term borrowing in case of war by the armed forces produced so-called army and navy bills, effectively short-dated promises to pay. The biggest experiment of all involved the South Sea Company, which offered to exchange all public debt in 1720 for shares. A similar exercise in 1719 had been attractive to both the government and the public, by improving the liquidity of outstanding debt. While the South Sea scheme ultimately failed, it demonstrated the attractions of liquid paper assets. The UK finally introduced consolidated annuities (“consols”), perpetual bonds with a relatively low interest rate (Dickson 1967). These were first issued in 1751. Originally carrying a yield of 3.5%, they were eventually converted to 3% in 1757 (and to 2.75% in 1888). Consols were liquidly traded, and became a prime savings vehicle for the moneyed classes in the UK.

2.2. Britain’s growth and industrial transformation.

Growth during the classic period of the British Industrial Revolution (1760-1850) was slow by modern standards. Initially, output growth per capita was barely faster than during the pre-industrial period. After the middle of the 18th century, growth accelerated from around 1% p.a. to 2.5%. At the same time, population increased rapidly, from 5.2 million to 19 million. Growth rates across sectors were highly unequal. Figure 2.2 shows annual GDP by sector. Agriculture expanded relatively slowly over the period 1700-1860, increasing total output by a factor of 2.8 – a slower rate of increase than that of population.

Over the same period, real GDP in services increased 9-fold, and in industry, 14-fold (Broadberry et al. 2010).  

6 Galor (2005) gives a figure of 0.1% p.a. for the pre-industrial era, while the work of Crafts and Harley suggests rates of 0.2% p.a. in the years 1760-1800.


Figure 2.2. Debt and Expenditure in the UK, 1692-1860.
• Mid-18th century witnesses broad attempts at imperial reform.

• For instance, Charles III (r. 1759-1788) re-centralizes the ruling of the Spanish empire.

• Goals:

  1. Reorganize and rationalize territorial administration.

  2. Control colonies from the metropolis more tightly.

  3. Increase revenue to pay off debt and sustained permanent armies in the Americas.
Imperial dilemmas, II

• Why?

• Constant necessary upgrade of the fiscal-military state in 18th-century Europe.

• Much resistance in other empires (several tax revolts in the Spanish Empire, such as the Rebellion of Túpac Amaru II, 1780-c.1782).

• In the case of British, also need to improve relations with Native Americans, which mostly sided with the French during the war.

• Key players in Britain: Townshend brothers (George and Charles) and Board of Trade.
Consequence in British America

- Busy with the problems of the Stuart dynasty (Civil War, Cromwell, 1688, Jacobite rebellions, etc.), the London government had largely left the colonies to fend for themselves (either through private companies, religious minorities, or wealthy aristocrats).

- Although the British government had always helped the colonies. For example, subsidies to migration.

- New powerful London elite wants to end of the “salutary neglect.”

Edmund Burke (1775)

“When I know that the colonies in general owe little or nothing to any care of ours, and that they are not squeezed into this happy form by the constraints of watchful and suspicious government, but that, through a wise and salutary neglect, a generous nature has been suffered to take her own way to perfection; when I reflect upon these effects, when I see how profitable they have been to us, I feel all the pride of power sink, and all presumption in the wisdom of human contrivances melt and die away within me.”
Imperial reforms, I

- The 1763 Proclamation Line.

- Why?

- Strong opposition.

- However, no constitutional principle at stake.
Imperial reforms, II

- The Stamp Act of 1765.

- Four progressively more pointed questions:
  1. Direct vs. indirect taxes (i.e. tariffs).
  2. External vs. internal taxes.
  3. Virtual vs. actual representation (rotten boroughs).
  4. Parliamentary supremacy vs. sovereignty.

Declaratory Act of 1766

“(Parliament) had hath, and of right ought to have, full power and authority to make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the colonies and people of America ... in all cases whatsoever.”
Anno quinto

Georgii III. Regis.

C A P. XII.

An Act for granting and applying certain Stamp Duties, and other Duties, in the British Colonies and Plantations in America, towards further defraying the Expences of defending, protecting, and securing the said Colonies; and for amending such Parts of the several Acts of Parliament relating to the Trade and Revenues of the said Colonies and Plantations, as direct the Manner of determining and recovering the Penalties and Forfeitures there-mentioned.

HEREAS by an Act made in the last Session of Parliament, several Duties were granted, continued, and appropriated, towards defraying the Expences of defending, protecting, and securing, the British Colonies and Plantations in America; and whereas it is just and necessary, that Provision be made for raising a further Revenue within your Majesty's Dominions in America, towards defraying the said Expenses; The House of Commons of Great Britain, in Parliament assembled, do ordain and declare, that...
Old Sarum
Different views on the Constitution

- Sir Edward Coke: old “whig” constitution.

- Sir William Blackstone: new “whig” constitution that comes from the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

- Also, related to:
  2. Radical republican ideas of the 17th century (mix of humanist thought and “Old Testamentalism”).
  3. National-Protestant concerns about crypto-Catholic threads in mainstream Anglican Church and tyrannical monarchical powers plus a tradition of conspiracy thought (Richard J. Hofstadter called it “the paranoid style in American politics”).
  4. The appointment of bishops in America.
THE ROYALIST REVOLUTION
MONARCHY AND THE AMERICAN FOUNDING
AMERICAN ZION
The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War

ERAN SHALEV
CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

John Phillip Reid
• 1764 Sugar Act.

• Townshend Acts.

• 1751 and 1764 Currency Acts.

• 1773 Tea Act.

• 1774 Quebec Act.
1774 Intolerable Acts:

1. The Boston Port Act.
4. The Quartering Act.

After the intolerable acts are widely known in the colonies, there is no way to back down for the colonial elites.

Contingency: what if?
• Declaration of independence focuses on George III, not parliament.

• This is not a random choice.

• Colonials want to have a direct relationship with the monarch (federalism theory of divided sovereignty) similar to later Dominions.

• Parliament is extremely worried about this:
  1. 1688 and the Stuart experience.
  2. Coup in Sweden.
  3. Political-economy of Ireland.
  4. Structure of mercantilism.
  5. Demographic dynamism of the colonies.

• Interestingly, later in the war George III becomes more of a hard-linear than Parliament.
• Communication technology.

• Old republican ideas by Algernon Sidney and others.

• Tropes of political corruption: *Cato’s Letters* by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon.

• Internal British politics is much subtler than we often think: *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* by Lewis Namier.
Lewis Namier
The Structure of Politics
At the Accession of George III

Lewis Namier
Second Edition

Open University Set Book