

**Democracy Defenders of America**  
**Basic Session 1**  
**“The Road to the American Democracy”**

**Learning Objectives:**

- What were some of the grievances the colonists had against Great Britain?
- In what ways did the colonists respond to unpopular government policies?
- How did these events lead to the writing of the Declaration of Independence?

**Lesson Note:**

While history has shown us many different models of democracies, the initial formation of the government we have today was influenced by England and British history. We look at this primary influence to understand how our form of democracy was started.

**Why did the American colonies become unhappy with the British government?**

**The First British Colonies in America**

There were many reasons that British citizens were attracted to America. They sought religious freedom, land, opportunity, and possible riches. In 1606, King James I granted a charter to the Virginia Company, a group of British citizens. This colony would be a moneymaking venture (gold, furs, and trade) and establish control of land in North America. (Spain also was seeking power in North America). Under this colonial system, the King ruled from England, and benefitted from the success of the colonies.

The new colonists were English citizens and were ruled by the decisions of the King and of Parliament, who made the laws and stood up for people’s rights. But it was difficult to have their government so far away, and the colonists needed local governments to help decide on local issues. They formed a representative government in Virginia, and in Plymouth, the colonists had signed the Mayflower Compact agreeing to majority rule government where all men would vote on issues. (see Mayflower Compact)

By the 1750’s, Great Britain had established a number of colonies in North America. The American colonists thought of themselves as citizens of Great Britain and subjects of King George III, though every colony by that time had its own government. They were able to make their own decisions without interference from England. However, they were tied to Britain through trade and by the way they were governed. Trade was intentionally restricted, so the colonies had to rely on Britain for imported goods and supplies. There were no banks and very little money, so colonists used barter and credit to get the things they needed.

However, the colonists had one thing most people in Europe only dreamed of—the right to make most of their own decisions without much interference. That would soon change...

## **A Change is Gonna Come: The Proclamation of 1763**

In the 1750s, British and the American colonists joined together to fight against the French and their Indian allies in the French and Indian War. While this war resulted in Great Britain gaining a tremendous amount of territory (see map), This war was costly, resulting in massive debt. Following the war, Great Britain wanted to protect their larger empire, keep order, and pay off their debt. There were also problems between the colonists and Native Americans as the colonists moved farther westward. These issues resulted in new laws which caused new problems for the colonists.

The King issued the Proclamation of 1763 prohibiting settlements beyond the Appalachian Mountains. The problem was that colonists had already settled on these lands. They were told to return. Colonists saw this as tyranny, the unjust use of government power. The British government ignored these complaints.

Great Britain also needed money to pay for its war debts. The King and Parliament believed they had the right to tax the colonies. They decided to require several kinds of taxes from the colonists to help pay for the French and Indian War. These taxes included the Stamp Act, passed in 1765, which required the use of special paper bearing an embossed tax stamp for all legal documents. Other laws, such as the Townsend Acts, passed in 1767, required the colonists to pay taxes on imported goods like tea, paper, glass and paint.

Many colonists felt that they should not pay these taxes, because they were passed in England by Parliament, not by their own colonial governments. They protested, saying that these taxes violated their rights as British citizens.

Samuel Adams, from Boston led the opposition to these new taxes. He wrote pamphlets and gave speeches. Boycotting British goods became a popular form of non-violent protest. Women were key to making the boycott work, as they were the main shoppers for the family. They also began making home-spun cloth. Women taught other women and cloth-making became a patriotic movement to avoid buying and paying taxes on British- made cloth and clothing. The boycott worked-it didn't raise the money expected and harmed British merchants who lost out on sales. Parliament repealed the Townshend Acts, but King George insisted on keeping the tax on tea.

Adding to colonial grievance, the British decided to expand the British army in America to 7,500. In 1765 Parliament passed the Quartering Act that said the colonists needed to find or pay for lodging for British soldiers stationed in America. With the French and Indian War over, many colonists saw no need for soldiers to be stationed in the colonies. Rising tension between colonists in Boston and the British soldiers stationed there resulted in violence. (See more Boston Massacre)

In 1773 some colonists in Boston, Massachusetts demonstrated their frustration by dressing up like Native Americans, sneaking onto ships in the harbor, and dumping imported tea into the water. This was called the Boston Tea Party. The British acted by closing the Boston port. A similar but smaller tea party took place in Yorktown, Virginia in 1774.

Other unpopular laws under the Intolerable Acts closed the Boston port, placed the government of Massachusetts under British control, and sent more troops in to enforce these laws. By this time, colonists from across the American colonies began to unite against Britain's policies. While they were angry, they hoped to find a peaceful solution to their grievances and called for a meeting.

The First Continental Congress met in 1774 to make a list of complaints about the way Britain was treating the colonies. Many people in America felt their concerns were not being heard, and this caused more unhappiness in the colonies. Despite their frustration, they sent a respectful letter asking the King to respect their rights and consider their complaints.

The King did not respond.

Finally, the colonists decided that the only solution was self-government. On July 4, 1776, the colonies adopted the Declaration of Independence. Written mostly by Thomas Jefferson, it listed the grievances against Great Britain and declared the United States free from Great Britain.