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# How Revolutionary was the American Revolution?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)

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The broad outline of the Revolutionary War is familiar to most of us. The American Revolution, also called the War for Independence, took place between 1775 and 1783. It was a fight waged by thirteen British colonies against their mother country, England. At the time, England was the most powerful country in the world. The war, rather surprisingly, was won by the colonies who named themselves the United States of America. With the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1783, the United States gained what it had been fighting for, its independence.

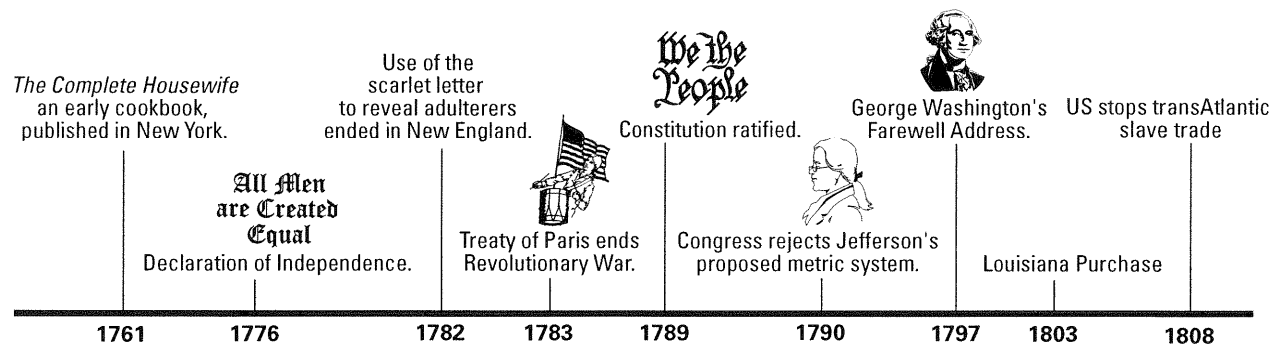
More than two centuries later, the American Revolution has left its clear mark on this land. The Philadelphia 76ers, The New England Patriots; Washington, DC; Madison, Wisconsin; The 4th of July; Sam Adams beer; Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis; Pulaski Day; The TV show *The Jeffersons*, – hundreds, even thousands of American teams, towns, counties, streets, schools, and families can trace their names to the same remarkable event, the American Revolution.

Beyond names, the Revolution has left other footprints on our historical landscape – the Stamp Act, the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, the Declaration of Independence, the battles of Lexington and Concord, Saratoga and Yorktown. Certain stories from the Revolution have etched themselves on America's soul – Washington's men walking barefoot through the snow to Valley Forge, 16 year old boys facing Redcoat musket balls at 40 paces, black slaves torn by the decision to support the American cause of national freedom or fight for the

British and the hope of personal freedom.

Amidst all this history and all these national memories, is it fair to ask just how much of a revolution was it? Did the Revolution really produce significant long-lasting changes? A high school student in the 1950s never even thought about the question. It was assumed that the Revolution meant big changes like democracy and liberty and equality for all. Then in the 1960s and 1970s history books and high school students did a flip-flop. It was the time of Vietnam and civil rights protest and all American history was suspect. Many saw the Revolution as phony freedom.

Historians have also had conflicting views on the question. One group has argued that the Revolution was not very revolutionary. These historians see the Revolution as **conservative**; that is, even while throwing off British rule, the American leaders tried to conserve or hold onto many of the old ways. These historians admit we got our political independence from England but there was no significant social or economic revolution. There was no class war where the poor destroyed the rich. In fact, what really happened, they argue, is that one group of rich white male American leaders, like Washington and Jefferson, took over from another group of rich white male leaders – King George and the members of British Parliament. Two famous historians in this little-or-no-change group were Mary and Charles Beard. They studied the U.S. Constitution which was written just four years after the Revolutionary War ended and argued that it was drafted by wealthy white males –



many of them lawyers – for the purpose of hanging onto their power and wealth.

This idea of a conserving revolution that produced limited change has been supported more recently by historians like Edmund Morgan and Howard Zinn. Morgan believes that the Revolution was largely an intellectual movement, that it marked a victory for the idea of equality but that further changes were largely accidental. Zinn also believes the Revolution was quite limited in scope. In 1980 he wrote: “It seems like the rebellion against British rule allowed a certain group of the colonial elite to replace those loyal to England, give some benefits to small landholders, and leave poor white working people and tenant farmers in very much their old situation.” In other words, not much change.

A second group of historians views the American Revolution differently. They see the Revolution as more **radical**, producing some significant changes above and beyond independence. An early leader in this group was J. Franklin Jameson. Way back in 1926 Jameson argued that the American Revolution was much more than a political break from England; it also sparked a social change that lives with us still. A more recent historian in this group is Alfred E. Young. Young draws a distinction between what he calls the external revolution and the internal revolution. The external revolution was the break from England. The internal revolution resulted from the changes that took place within the United States as a result of the war. While admitting to limits, Young argues that an internal revolution did occur.

In 1992 historian Gordon Wood added even more fuel to the debate. In his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Wood

wrote: “By the early years of the nineteenth century the Revolution had created a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world.” Wood calls the American Revolution the most change-producing, radical event in American history.

Wood won the Pulitzer prize for this work, but he also took a lot of heat. One concern was that Wood did not have enough to say about women, blacks, and Indians.

Before moving on to examine some documents, a caution is needed. When historians of any stripe have tried to calculate the degree of change caused by the Revolution, they have run into at least two problems.

Problem #1 is the problem of adequate data. In order to measure change caused by the Revolution, you have to know what existed before and what existed after. The data is often missing or is very thin.

Problem #2 is the problem of proving cause and effect. Just because one thing occurs after something else does not mean it was caused by the first event. Also, some of the results of the Revolution may not have occurred immediately. Should the Revolutionary War which ended in 1783 get credit for ending the Atlantic slave trade in 1808? Should the Revolution in any way get credit for winning women the right to vote in 1920? In other words, is there a time limit on causation?

Amidst all of this disagreement, one thing seems clear: the debate over the American Revolution of 1776 carries into the 21st century. Examine the 17 documents that follow and join the ongoing discussion: *How Revolutionary was the American Revolution?*

