

The End of Empire? The American Revolution and the British Empire

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Seen through American eyes, July 4, 1776 marked a triumphant moment: the birth of a bold new nation committed to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Through British eyes, the American Revolution looked quite different. Was it a crisis? A reckoning? Or an opportunity? Did it mark the beginning of the end of Britain's grand empire? Or was it the catalyst for a bigger, broader effort to tamp down dissent and assert British dominance across the globe?

This new course investigates the transatlantic forces that shaped the American Revolution and the imperial consequences of this nation's break with Britain. It asks how the familiar story of the American Revolution—its causes, course, and consequences—changes when we place the Revolution in the context of Britain's global empire. Answering these big questions requires us to cast aside worn-out notions of American exceptionalism and to embrace a broader and vastly more dynamic narrative that recognizes the impact wrought by the free movement of goods, ideas, and people around Britain's imperial system. Indeed, approaching the American Revolution through the lens of Britain's Empire invites us to place the experiences of loyalist exiles, Irish farmers, British prisoners-of-war, Canadian fugitives, Indian tea-growers, Chinese traders, Australian convicts, and African statesmen on the same stage as the Minutemen and the Sons of Liberty.

This course is comprised of eight lectures. First, we'll examine the Boston Tea Party, a protest against imperial tyranny and monopoly power. Second, we'll probe the life of Thomas Paine, the British emigrant who set Americans on the path to self-determination. Third, we'll deconstruct the Declaration of Independence to consider its role in formalizing a first-of-its-kind secessions movement in the heart of Britain's New World empire. Fourth, we'll look at the resulting war from perspective of the Palace, the Parliament, and the British people. Fifth, we'll survey the conflict from the vantage of the Irish and their descendants in America. Sixth, we'll pivot southward to study the fate of empire on Britain's Caribbean islands. Seventh, we'll explore the plight of the Black refugees who struck out for new lives beyond the borders of the newly United States. Finally, we'll investigate the catalyzing role the American Revolution played in the settlement of Australia as a destination for forced migrants from Britain who might otherwise have ended up in America. This class blends lectures and discussion and rich visual and textual evidence from primary sources.

Tempest in a Tea Pot: The Boston Tea Party

The Boston Tea Party was a response to the 1773 Tea Act, new legislation designed to reduce tea smuggling within the British Empire and boost the sales of tea imported to the American colonies by the East India Company, a mega corporation with an all-too-cosy relationship to the British Government. But, of course, it all backfired spectacularly. In this class, we'll explore how the resulting Boston Tea Party marks the first major protest in America against corporate greed and the effects of globalization.

The Tragedy of Thomas Paine

When Tom Paine, the author of *Common Sense*, died in June 1809 only a dozen people came to his funeral. This class examines Paine's meteoric rise to celebrity status during the American Revolution and his equally dramatic fall from grace in the decades afterwards during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Once lionized as our most relatable and revolutionary founding father, Tom Paine died a pariah, too radical, uncompromising, and European for the cautious new country he had called into being.

America's Birth Certificate: The Declaration of Independence

The *Declaration of Independence* is a peculiar thing. What is it exactly? Is it a birth certificate announcing happy news, or a petition for divorce full of grievance and score-settling, or something else? Is it aimed at the American people, or King George, or the rest of the world? Was it the first ever declaration of independence, or a cheap imitation of a genre already well established? What did people at the time make of it? What did it change? Why does it matter? This class will tackle the fascinating origins, misunderstood purpose, and extraordinary global legacy of the *Declaration of Independence*.

Disunited Kingdom: The American Revolution in Britain

Seen through American eyes, the Revolution marks a triumphant moment. Through British eyes, it looked quite different. To the King, the war for independence was an affront, a temper tantrum by an ungrateful colonial rabble. But, as we'll explore in this class, beyond the palace and Parliament, British responses to the war were anything but monolithic. The country was bitterly divided as to what the war was about, how to win it, and whether it was worth it.

The Fighting Irish: Ireland in the American Revolution

Men of Irish heritage played crucial roles in fighting the American Revolution, siding with the patriots against the British Army in overwhelming numbers. In this class, we will explore the Revolution from the perspective of the Irish and their descendants in America. Drawing on the latest scholarship, we'll reconstruct the history of English and Irish antagonism, the role of religious faith in decisions about loyalty and affiliation, and the political and economic impact of the American Revolution on Ireland itself.

The Jewel in the Crown: The American Revolution in the Caribbean

In 1775, the British Empire in the New World consisted not of thirteen colonies, but of almost thirty. The most valuable were in the Caribbean and Jamaica was the 'jewel in the Crown,' a sugar-exporting factory that generated more wealth for Britons than most mainland colonies combined. In this class, we will explore how fearful imperial officials worked to split their empire in half, insulating the British West Indies from the contagion of revolution by any means possible.

Harry Washington and the Revolution's African Diaspora

For enslaved African Americans, the Revolution was a freedom war—a once-in-a-century opportunity to try to declare their own independence and escape from slavery during the chaos of war. This class explores the phenomenon of Black insurgency during the war years via the life of Harry, the former enslaved stable hand of George Washington. Harry ran away from Washington in 1776, joined the British Army, and ultimately resettled in Sierra

Leone in West Africa. There he led his own independence movement to establish a free Black government beyond British control.

The Newer World: The American Revolution and Australia

The loss of thirteen American colonies turned Britain's empire upside down, shutting off a transatlantic passage that the British government had used to dump convicted criminals in the Chesapeake colonies in huge quantities before the war. In the wake of independence, that government pivoted decisively, establishing a new penal colony near Port Jackson, New South Wales, in 1788. With those first 736 convicts and forced migrants came guards, supervisors, support staff and their families, seeding English settlement of Australia and turning that vast continent into the newest jewel in Britain's imperial crown.