250 years since the Stamp Act

The Coming of the American Revolution

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On March 22, 1765, British Parliament received the Royal Assent of King George III for a law drafted by Prime Minister George Grenville called the "Duties in American Colonies Act." The Stamp Act, as it became known, imposed a tax on all paper products—from newspapers and pamphlets to professional licenses to playing cards—sold in Britain's American colonies.

When word of the Stamp Act reached the colonies, it brought forth a storm of protest unanticipated in Westminster. Invoking the slogan "no taxation without representation," newspapers and pamphlets condemned the act. Protesters took to the streets in New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Newport and lesser towns. The most conspicuous of these demonstrations took place in Boston, where the mansion of the colonial governor, Thomas Hutchinson, was sacked by a mob.

The towns and cities saw the emergence of secret societies called the Sons of Liberty. Socially undifferentiated—they were comprised of merchants, artisans, "mechanics" and laborers—the Sons of Liberty led boycotts that damaged British commercial interests and organized attacks against symbols of royal authority.

Beginning with Virginia's House of Burgesses, one by one the colonial assemblies condemned the Stamp Act. The assemblies were linked up through Committees of Correspondence which carried on letter-writing campaigns with the aim of coordinating protest in the different colonies. This culminated in the Stamp Act Congress, a pan-colonial organization that gathered in New York City in October of 1765, and which predicted the formation of the Continental Congress a decade later.

Astounded by the tumult, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act on March 18, 1766, less than half a year after its November 1, 1765, effective date. In fact, the scope of the protests, and the threatened mobbing of royal collectors, had made it so "no one in America was prepared to distribute the stamped paper," in the words of Edmund S. Morgan. It was quite literally a dead letter.

But simultaneous to repeal, Parliament imposed the face-saving Declaratory Act, whose long title, "An Act for the better securing the Dependency of His Majesty's Dominions in America upon the Crown and Parliament of Great Britain," only pointed to the escalation of the crisis.

Indeed, a contest had emerged in which Parliament imposed a series of increasingly aggressive measures to reassert imperial authority—the Quartering Act, the Townshend Revenue Acts, the Tea Act, and the Coercive Acts—and, in response, the colonists took increasingly bold steps to resist, culminating in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence.

Given the outcome, it might seem peculiar that, in its ideological form, the American Revolution unfolded as a polemic over constitutionalism. It is difficult to overstate the dimensions of this debate, which actually continued through the drafting of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Thousands upon thousands of pamphlets, distributed cumulatively in the millions, saturated the highly-literate population.

The Stamp Act crisis set the terms of this debate until Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, in 1776, called for a final break with Britain. Up until then, the Americans, led by figures such as John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, James Otis of Massachusetts, and Patrick Henry of Virginia, insisted that without representation in Parliament, there could be no imposition of internal taxes. (Remarkably, few colonists questioned Parliament's prerogative to regulate their *external* trade.)

Grenville and his allies in Parliament did not disagree. They simply insisted that the Americans were already represented, but "virtually," just as were many municipalities in England that did not return representatives to Westminster. To its advocates, this position seemed unimpeachable: King-in-parliament, as the indivisible sovereign power of the empire, by definition represented the entire realm.

The legal debate triggered by the Stamp Act over direct versus virtual representation can only be understood as taking place within the broader context of the Enlightenment. Just as scientists like Newton, Galileo and Copernicus had defied clerical authority and superstitious thinking to question the natural world, philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Voltaire and Montesquieu had begun to question the social world. Why were there those who ruled, and those who were ruled over? Or, as Rousseau asked, why was man born free and was yet everywhere in chains? Philosophers answered these questions in different ways, but that the questions were posed at all was an implicit challenge to Europe's ancient feudal order, with its supposedly immutable and divinely-sanctioned social distinctions, its kings and queens, lords and ladies.

The Enlightenment was the ideological outgrowth of a new and rapidly growing bourgeois world straining against the shackles of the old feudal order handed down from the Middle Ages. The first great blows against that old order were delivered in the English revolutions of the 17th century, which saw the beheading of one king and the forced abdication of another. The colonists took pride in these revolutions. "Free England" was the only bastion of liberty, they believed, in a world of despotism and tyranny. It was precisely because of this history that the colonists believed that, by rising up in protest against the Stamp Act, they were merely acting as the best Englishmen.

For the same reasons the colonists had celebrated the English triumph over France and her continental allies Spain, Austria and Russia, in the Seven Years War (1756-1763). The French and Indian

War, as it is called in the US, was upheld as the triumph of English liberty over French and "popish" tyranny.

But the global war that had unfolded in North America, Europe, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent had left Britain saddled with significant debts. The Exchequer's obligations to its creditors had increased by some 80 percent to £130 million. His Majesty's navy and large, far-flung professional army, much of it now located in the vast interior of North America—and itself a potent political force in British society— had to be armed, housed and fed.

Parliament decided that the colonists should pay. The long title of the Stamp Act reflected its aim. It was a duty "towards further defraying the expences of defending, protecting, and securing" the colonies.

If the idea were to convince the colonials, appealing to military defense was the wrong strategy. Their acute defensiveness of English liberties made them suspicious of the corrupting influence of power, which they believed inevitably operated through conspiracy. The Americans, complained Sir Edmund Burke, "snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze." And nowhere did they suspect conspiracy more than in the standing army and its retinue of professional officers. Thus John Adams could complain in 1763, even in the wake of the massive Indian uprising that killed hundreds of British soldiers and colonial settlers known as Pontiac's Rebellion, that "Revenue" from the colonists was "appropriated to the maintenance of swarms of officers and pensioners in idleness and luxury."

The British were baffled by such filial ingratitude. "Protection and obedience are reciprocal," Grenville insisted. "Great Britain protects America; America is bound to yield obedience. If, not, tell me when the Americans were emancipated?"

Grenville's rhetorical question took for granted the subordinate status of the Americans. And, in fact, the colonials had acquiesced to numerous Parliamentary measures for more than a century that had as their express aim the maintenance of colonial subjugation. This appeared perfectly natural in the world of the late 18th century. The British revolutions of the 17th century had gone far, but the aristocracy remained with its ancient privileges.

Advocates of American exceptionalism, who wish to portray the revolution as a nationalist and essentially conservative event, object that it could not truly have been directed against feudalism, because there was no aristocracy in the colonies. But, as Gordon Wood has demonstrated in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, the aristocratic principle was fully operative. Like Europe, the colonies existed in a world of patronage and hierarchy. The social distinctions of Europe were transplanted to the new world, including "the most Ancient and universal of all Divisions of People,"—between those who did not work and those who did, between society's gentlemen and ladies and "the Vulgar."

The growth of the colonies challenged this order. Already by the late colonial period the American merchant marine was among the largest in the world. But the big merchants, John Hancock in the front rank, chafed against the restrictions of colonial trade upheld by the Navigation Acts. The shopkeepers and artisans of city and town were controlled by Parliamentary measures and "enumerated lists" of restricted commodities that aimed to maintain a balance of payments favorable to the mother country, for example the Iron Act of 1750 which forbade colonists from making finished products of their crude iron. Plantation owners resented Parliament's imposition of duties on the sale of tobacco that amounted to 15 times its American selling price. Land speculators bridled at Parliament's imposition, in the Proclamation of 1763, of restrictions on the colonists' westward expansion.

Between 1750 and 1770, the population doubled from one million to two million. "This demographic explosion, this gigantic movement of people, was the most basic and the most liberating force working on American society during the latter half of the eighteenth century," Wood writes. It was not just a question of quantity, but of quality. The population was overwhelmingly comprised of small landowning farmers, most of them literate. There existed no peasantry. Land ownership, according to British custom, was the basis of citizenship. Its broad distribution made the American colonies the most democratic place in the world even before the revolution, and engendered among the colonials a spirit of equality often noted—and frequently lamented— by European observers.

The growth of economy and population—not the colonists' deprivation and oppression but their relative wealth and freedom—stretched to the breaking point the bands of the monarchical authority and the mercantilist economic system overseen by the royal governors and their retainers, and above that the Privy Council, the Board of Trade, the Secretary of State in charge of Colonial Affairs, the Commissioners of Customs, the Treasury, the Admiralty and the King himself.

We should therefore not be surprised that the second chapter of the bourgeois-democratic revolution took place on the very fringes of European civilization. To borrow a metaphor from Lenin, the Stamp Act crisis revealed that the chain of the old feudal order was about to break, but at its weakest link. Or, as Franklin put it, "A great Empire, like a great Cake, is most easily diminished at the Edges."

It did not end on edges. In 1789, the wave of revolution, inspired by the events in America, returned across the Atlantic and crashed into the very heart of the ancient regime, absolutist France. It was in the American Revolution, Marx wrote in a letter to Abraham Lincoln, that "the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century." The American Revolution thus provides a link between the English Revolution and the Great French Revolution in the creation of the modern, capitalist world.

It is tempting, but false, to assume that the colonists set off in 1765 to launch an American Revolution. That was the work of the Imperial Crisis itself. Many years later, John Adams summarized this process in a letter to Thomas Jefferson:

"What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 - 1775, in the course of fifteen years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington."

In that revolution "in the minds of the people," the Stamp Act was of decisive importance.