The Politics of the American Revolution
**DRAFT**

Political conflicts brought about by the French and Indian War changed the stable relationship between Great Britain and its North American colonies. Angry colonists coordinated a response that sharpened the conflict and eventually brought about widespread agreement on the need for independence, but collective action problems undermined the war effort.

Intro: Three Types of Political Problems

Politics encompasses innumerable issues, but all can be classified into three general types: conflicts, coordination problems, and a distinct subset of coordination problems called collective action problems.

- **Conflict**: Conflict occurs when two or more people or groups have incompatible wants. Because they cannot both be satisfied, at least one of them (and possibly both), will find the outcome unsatisfactory. Examples include an election or a contentious policy issue such as abortion.
- **Coordination**: Coordination problems occur when we can’t achieve something individually, but must organize multiple people (or multiple organization, or multiple countries) to achieve it. Examples include mobilizing voters to help your side win a close election or informing people about an issue they care about, but were unaware of, such as a historical building at risk of being demolished.
- **Collective Action**: Collective action problems occur when two conditions exist: 1) there is a collective benefit the group desires; and 2) not everyone’s effort is required to achieve the benefit, which creates the potential for free riding, which could prevent the group from achieving the benefit. Examples include limiting air pollution and maintaining the tidiness of public spaces;
1. Conflict Between Britain and Its North American Colonies Before the Revolution

For over 150 years from 1607, when the first British colony in North America was founded, to 1763, when the French and Indian War (also known as the 7 Years’ War) ended, the relationship between Britain and its colonies was relatively peaceful. Many early colonists had left Britain because their Christian sects conflicted with the British government’s officially approved sect, the Church of England, but many others, particularly in the later years of colonization, came because their economic opportunities were greater in the colonies than at home. And of course during this 150 year period several generations of colonists had been born and raised in the colonies, many of them never having set foot in the home country but all paying allegiance to it and considering themselves English. Although there were conflicting interests among different social and economic sectors of the colonies, there was enough satisfaction with English rule that rebellion and independence were not issues on the political agendas of the various colonies.

Normally, such stable political situations will continue until some new issue develops to disrupt it, and in this case the disrupting issue sprang from two changes that followed British and Colonial victory in the French and Indian war. Geographically, the political landscape changed because Britain had gained large tracts of formerly French held territory between the Mississippi River and Appalachian Mountains (which had roughly formed the western boundaries of the original colonies, as shown in the map).

Colonists were eager to move into these spoils of war, seeking inexpensive and fertile farm land (today this region is among the world’s most productive agricultural regions), but the British King, wanting to minimize violence
between the indigenous populations and the colonists, and the need to spend money protecting the colonists, forbade them from crossing the Appalachians in the Royal Proclamation of 1763.  ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/proc1763.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/proc1763.asp)) Some had already begun to work farms, others wanted to, and still others wanted to claim land so they could re-sell it at a profit to others wanting land, and they felt betrayed by their government’s decision to make these lands unavailable.

The other significant change was that the experience of the war persuaded the British government that it needed to keep a standing military force in the colonies, and because it was there to protect the colonists, they were the ones who should cover the cost. Among these revenue measures were the Sugar Act of 1764 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/sugar_act_1764.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/sugar_act_1764.asp)), and the Stamp Act of 1765 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/stamp_act_1765.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/stamp_act_1765.asp)). The Sugar Act placed import taxes and restrictions on sugar, coffee imported from any place except Great Britain, wine, and a variety of textiles (used for producing clothing). The Stamp Act required a wide variety of paper items to use paper produced in London and embossed with the appropriate revenue stamp. This included all legal documents, university degrees, bills of lading, and business licenses, as well as playing cards, pamphlets, newspapers, advertisements in newspapers, and calendars. From the British government’s perspective, and perhaps from our perspective today, this seems entirely fair, but it did not seem fair to the colonists. They argued that the military presence was unnecessary, and objected to the requirement that the tax be paid in British currency, which was in short supply in the colonies compared to the local currencies of each colony. They further objected that the tax was a violation of their rights as English citizens—as the colonies had no representatives in the British parliament, they were being taxed without representation, without having a voice in the government decisions that created the tax.

Over the next several years, some of these offensive laws were repealed in response to the protests and difficulty in enforcing them, but others were enacted that also offended the colonists. Bear in mind that the change in British governing style began after the French and Indian War ended in 1763, and the colonies did not declare independence until 1776, so this initial period of conflict was spread out over a 13 year period. Conflict did not proceed at a uniform rate, but waxed and
waned in response to different actions of the British government, with occasional spikes in violence. In response to the unrest the government stationed troops in the colonies, not to protect them from attack, but to control them and protect government officials whose job it was to enforce the unpopular laws. This use of soldiers to control, rather than protect, the public also outraged the colonists, resulting in 1770 in the Boston Massacre, when British soldiers fired on a crowd of protestors who were verbally abusing and throwing objects at them, killing five people and injuring six others, an act that further inflamed passions.

Another high point of conflict occurred in response to the Tea Act of 1773, which gave the British East India Company a monopoly on importation of tea to the colonies. Tea in the colonies had the importance of coffee in American life today, or even a larger importance. It was a staple drink of everyday life, and middle class merchant families had daily tea ceremonies as a way of demonstrating status. Tea had first been taxed with the unpopular 1767 Townshend acts, and one response was to smuggle tea illegally into the colonies to avoid the tax, while others began to boycott tea (the beginnings of Americans’ centuries’ long love affair with coffee). The grant of a monopoly to the East India Company threatened the livelihood of colony-based shipping companies, and by flooding the market with surplus tea, drove down the price to the point where a boycott was hard to sustain. The response of radical protestors in the colonies was the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, an attack on ships of the East India Company and the destruction of an entire shipment of tea.

This action—very costly to the East India Company, on which the cash-strapped British government was very dependent for revenue—led to a series of punitive acts by parliament that the British referred to as the Coercive Acts, but the colonists called the Intolerable Acts. These acts closed the harbor of Boston, constraining the import of goods and economically harming everyone whose livelihood was based on the shipping industry; eliminated Massachusetts’ traditional self-governance with a grant of sweeping power to the royally appointed governor of the colony; ordered that any trials of royal officials would take place outside the colonies for fear they could not get a fair trial in the colonies, which colonists believed would allow law-breaking officials to go unpunished; and gave colonial governors more power to
confiscate unoccupied buildings for the quartering of British soldiers (but not, as is often claimed, in people’s homes\(^1\)).

2. Coordination of an Effective Response

The most fundamental political task for unhappy colonists was a coordination problem—discovering whether others were also unhappy, building awareness of a shared interest, and organizing a coordinated response. They began with several disadvantages.

- First, the colonies were not in any sense a unified political group with a common history or identity. Each had its own distinct identity, and minimal political ties with the others.

- Second, not everyone in the colonies was unhappy. A considerable number of people remained loyal to the King throughout the whole period of conflict, and even throughout the Revolutionary War. Discontented colonists not only had to figure out how many people supported their cause vs. how many supported the government’s policies, they had to spread the word of their cause without revealing themselves to those who might inform on them.

- Third, not all the colonies shared their concerns. While Americans are accustomed to thinking only of the 13 colonies on the Atlantic coast that eventually won their independence, Great Britain also had colonies in Canada—including both an English-speaking territory and the French-speaking territory of Quebec, won in the French and Indian War—and in the Caribbean (including the colonies of East and West Florida, which remained loyal to Britain during the war but were later given to Spain, and then bought by the United States in 1819). Attempts were made to seek out discounted people in the Caribbean and English-speaking Canadian colonies, but with little success.

To overcome these difficulties, groups of discontented colonists in each colony formed secret organizations called Sons of Liberty, which published pamphlets
protesting parliament’s actions, organized protests, and developed “committees of correspondence” with similarly discontented people in other colonies, sharing their grievances and learning that they were not alone in their complaints. For example an “assembly of the respectable populace in New London,” Connecticut passed a resolution [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/ct_resolutions_1765.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/ct_resolutions_1765.asp) asserting that

> every tax imposed upon English subjects without consent is against the natural rights and the bounds prescribed by the English constitution [and] it is the duty of every person in the colonies to oppose by every lawful means the execution of those acts imposed on them...

And in Massachusetts, it was a Sons of Liberty group that destroyed the valuable shipment of tea in the Boston Tea Party, leading parliament to pass the Coercive acts (also known as the Intolerable Acts) in response.

In addition, unhappy colonists gathered together from multiple colonies to coordinate a joint response to the actions of parliament. These “congresses” were not governments or legislatures like the U.S. Congress, but simply a coming together for a meeting. The first of these was the Stamp Act Congress in 1765, organized in response to a proposal made by the Massachusetts colonial legislature, and attended by representatives from 9 colonies. This meeting issued a “Declaration of Rights and Grievances” ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/resolu65.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/resolu65.asp)). The text of this declaration makes it clear that active rebellion and independence were not yet on the political agenda, as it includes affirmations of their loyalty to and affection for the King—it is a critique of the parliament, and it appeals to the King to recognize their grievances against the parliament in which they have no voice.

> The members of this Congress, sincerely devoted, with the warmest sentiments of affection and duty to His Majesty's Person and Government... esteem it our indispensable duty to make the following declarations of our humble opinion, respecting the most essential rights and liberties Of the colonists, and of the grievances under which they labour, by reason of several late Acts of Parliament...
That the people of these colonies are not, and from their local circumstances cannot be, represented in the House of Commons in Great-Britain....

That the late Act of Parliament, entitled, An Act for granting and applying certain Stamp Duties, and other Duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America, etc... and several other Acts, by extending the jurisdiction of the courts of Admiralty beyond its ancient limits, have a manifest tendency to subvert the rights and liberties of the colonists...

Lastly, That it is the indispensable duty of these colonies, to the best of sovereigns, to the mother country, and to themselves, to endeavour by a loyal and dutiful address to his Majesty, and humble applications to both Houses of Parliament, to procure the repeal of the Act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, of all clauses of any other Acts of Parliament, whereby the jurisdiction of the Admiralty is extended as aforesaid, and of the other late Acts for the restriction of American commerce.

In understanding the politics of the Revolution, it is crucial to recognize that the move towards outright rebellion came slowly. This petition asks only for the repeal of certain laws, while reaffirming the colonists’ loyalty to their king and to the parliament.

In response to the Coercive/Intolerable Acts, twelve of the colonies (excluding Georgia) agreed to another meeting in 1774, 9 years after the Stamp Act Congress. This meeting came to be known as the First Continental Congress, and it marks a turning point in the conflict between the colonies and Britain. The delegates were divided in their opinion as to what actions they should take, and this time radical voices suggesting a weakening of ties between the colonies and Britain were heard. In the end the delegates settled on a colonies-wide boycott of imported goods from Britain, and an agreement to meet again if the boycotts did not persuade parliament to repeal the Acts. Again, though, they carefully directed their critique at parliament, while “avowing our allegiance to his majesty,” the king.2
Hope for a peaceful resolution of their grievances was fading, and the boycott did not achieve their goals, so the 2nd Continental Congress gathered in 1775. Again, this was not—at least not initially—any form of legislature or government, but a forum for representatives of the colonies to develop a coordinated joint response in their conflict with Britain. In a last ditch effort at a peaceful resolution, this Congress wrote an “Olive Branch Petition,” (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/contcong_07-08-75.asp) in July of 1775, still proclaiming their loyalty and begging the king to take steps to end the growing violence of protests by interceding with parliament. However in the preceding three weeks they had already taken steps to organize a collective armed response, commissioning George Washington as “General and Commander in chief, of the army of the United Colonies,” (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/contcong_06-17-75.asp) and drafting Articles of War (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/contcong_06-30-75.asp) to regulate their prospective—but not yet organized—army.

But even at this time, despite the urging of the more radical delegates, the Congress as a whole was not ready to declare independence (perhaps in part because they needed time to raise and train an army before inciting further military action by Britain). The first battles of the war were actually fought by local militias in Massachusetts, the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the month before the Second Continental Congress convened (but after it had already been planned). A British siege of the city of Boston, and the Battle of Bunker Hill occurred two months later, in June (coincidentally on the same day the Congress authorized Washington’s commission 300 miles away in Philadelphia). In July Washington began organizing the militias into a regular army, and 9 months later, in March of 1776, forced the British to retreat from Boston. In late 1775 the army launched and ill-fated invasion of Canada in an effort to take control of Quebec and encourage the French Canadians there (who had been a French colony until the French and Indian War) to join them in fighting the British. After some initial successes they were defeated in the Battle of Quebec in December of 1775, and in May of 1776 were driven back out of Canada.

All of this happened before the 2nd Continental Congress finally agreed to a Declaration of Independence. This final step, like all prior steps in the escalation of conflict, was a political coordination problem, as those who advocated it had to
persuade others—who still hoped for reconciliation—to agree to this ultimate action. The primary efforts of pro-independence radicals in the Congress during the first year of war were geared toward persuading others that all hope of peaceful reconciliation and repeal of the hated acts of parliament was gone, and that the colonies ought to break all ties with their home country.

Part of the problem many delegates faced was that the Congress had no clear authority to declare independence on behalf of the colonies. As noted above, it was not a government. Each delegate had been sent as a representative of his colony, some representing elected assemblies, some representing local congresses of leading citizens, all of them technically illegal and with minimal direct governing authority of their own, but each with authority over the delegates it had sent to represent it in the Congress. Some of them had explicitly prohibited their delegates from agreeing to separation from Britain, and in any case as separate political bodies, the decision to separate was one for each of the colonies’ governing bodies—or as we would say today, provisional governments—to make on its own. Their actions took a variety of forms. North Carolina was the first to authorize its delegates to approve independence, while Rhode Island declared independence on its own in May, 1776, two months before the Continental Congress’s joint Declaration of Independence. But in the same month, opponents of independence kept control of the Pennsylvania Assembly in a special election organized around the question of independence.³ The complexity of the coordination problem, then, exceeded just the difficulty of getting the 50+ delegates to the Congress to agree, but extended across the set of rebellious colonies and into the competing preferences of their citizens. John Adams referenced great Biblical figures to express his frustration with this complexity.

The Management of so complicated and mighty a Machine as the United Colonies requires the meekness of Moses, the Patience of Job, and the Wisdom of Solomon, added to the Valour of Daniel.⁴
3. Collective Action Problems in the Revolutionary War

The successful coordination of a demand for revolution did not bring the rebellious colonies’ political problems to an end. The Declaration of Independence was a claim, and a justification for that claim, but it did not actually create independence from Britain—that required a war, and the war involved a troublesome collective action problem. The collective goal of independence would accrue to all colonies if they defeated the British, but defeating the British did not require equal contributions from each colony. Despite Benjamin Franklin’s famous quip at the signing of the Declaration of Independence that “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately” free riding undermined the war effort.

To understand why free riding was a possibility, we have to understand the status of the colonies/states during the war. To begin, it helps to understand the meaning of the word “state.” Because the United States today is a single unified country, Americans understand the term “state” to mean a region, or the government of that region, that is below the national level. However this is a corruption of the term, and more properly the term “state” means an independent, sovereign, country. That is the meaning of the term the American founders would have understood, and so they did not proclaim themselves one new sovereign state called the United States, but 13 sovereign states that were united, as demonstrated in the final paragraph of the Declaration of Independence:

these United Colonies are... Free and Independent States;

Likewise, the Articles of Confederation—the governance document that the 2nd Continental Congress drafted during the war, which is often called America’s first constitution (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/artconf.asp)—emphatically assert that the states are individually independent and sovereign, and that the union is not a country, but a league of states.

Article II: Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled.
Article III: The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other...

The 2nd Continental Congress, which remained in session throughout the war, and which drafted the Articles of Confederation, was not a true national government, as the U.S. Government is today, but a meeting at which representatives from the governments of the states worked to coordinate their actions to achieve their states’ common goal of independence. The Congress had no real lawmaking power, and it had no executive power to enforce any laws it might try to make. James Madison, writing after the war, emphasized the Congress’s lack of force, and the fact that the United States were not one country.

A sanction is essential to the idea of law, as coercion is to that of Government. The [Articles] being destitute of both, wants the great vital principles of a Political Constitution. Under the form of such a Constitution [i.e., the Articles], it is in fact nothing more than a treaty of amity of commerce and alliance, between so many independent and Sovereign States.⁵

Despite having appointed George Washington the commander of the army of the united colonies—later called the Continental Army—the Congress had no authority to command anyone to join the army. The states were individually responsible for contributing a sufficient number of soldiers, and some of those were angered when Washington demanded that they swear loyalty to the United States, rather than to their own state. The New Jersey troops refused, saying “New Jersey is our country,” and one of the state’s delegates to the Congress denounced Washington for making the demand.⁶

And the Congress had no taxing authority, so it could raise money to equip and feed the army only by asking the states to contribute funds.

The combination of a collective benefit—Independence—and the ability of some of the beneficiaries to avoid contributing as much as others was a classic collective action problem, and free riding was a serious problem, as revealed by the historical record. State contributions of men, supplies and funds, varied widely, and were
inconsistent and unpredictable. Washington repeatedly requested funds from the Congress—which was struggling to get contributions from the states—complaining that his troops were short of clothing, food, medicine, and gunpowder.

Our sick naked, our well naked, our unfortunate men in captivity naked.⁷

Washington’s complaints were echoed by his Aide de Camp, Alexander Hamilton, in a letter to James Duane, a New York delegate to the Congress.

The imperfect and unequal provision made for the army is a...defect...without a speedy change the army must dissolve; it is now a mob, rather than an army, without clothing, without pay, without provision, without morals, without discipline. We begin to hate the country for its neglect of us...

The present mode of supplying the army—by state purchases—is not one of the least considerable defects of our system. It is too precarious a dependence, because the states will never be sufficiently impressed with our necessities. Each will make its own ease a primary object, the supply of the army a secondary one.⁸

The poverty of the army stood in sharp contrast to the general wealth of the colonies, to which people emigrated precisely because there was economic opportunity. Hamilton wrote more than a century and a half before the concept of collective action problems would be clearly defined, but the last sentence of the quote from his letter makes it clear that he recognized the problem of free riding, even if he had no name for it, and that he saw it happening among the states, very nearly to the complete collapse of the army and the destruction of the states’ hopes for independence.

We know that the states won, of course, which means they resolved this problem. One part of the solution was for the Congress to begin negotiating loans on its own authority (imagine loaning money to a group of rebels fighting against the world’s most powerful army), rather than waiting for the states to contribute. The other was to gain an ally, France, which was happy for an opportunity to weaken its
traditional enemy, Britain. France provided funds, weapons, and military units, both land and naval forces.

However, when the war was over, the new states were still operating under the same decentralized political structure, and new conflicts between them threatened to tear the union apart. Once again a problem of coordination was faced, as men in favor of a radical change in the structure of the union of states had to persuade others to abandon the Articles of Confederation, and the newly won independence of the states, to tie themselves together as a single country under a new Constitution. That is the subject of our next essay.

5 Madison, James. 1787. “Vices of the Political System of the United States.”