

## Lesson 9

# The American Revolution: The Upset of the Eighteenth Century

### Objective

- To understand why the colonists defeated the mother country in the American Revolution

### Notes to the Teacher

While many Americans viewed the conflict with England as an issue of paramount importance, many Englishmen saw the conflict differently. The British government considered its West Indian territories more valuable than the American colonies which did not, in all cases, fit the mercantile ideal; moreover, after a series of wars in the eighteenth century, the British treasury was nearly exhausted, and the government had to question large outlays for maintaining the empire. Finally, the government made a balance of power on the European continent the cornerstone of its foreign policy in order to preserve a market for British merchants. Still, Britain, having defeated the Dutch, French, and Spanish in earlier wars, had emerged as the dominant imperial power in the world and could be expected to shift its attention to solving problems within the empire even if this problem was with the relatively insignificant American colonies. After all, no colonies had ever successfully challenged the power of a mother country.

“Victory for the British during the American Revolution was always just around the corner and always inevitable.”<sup>1</sup> This statement by Henry Steele Commager summarizes well the feelings that most Englishmen, as well as some Americans, had about the eventual winner in any conflict between Britain and the colonies. Perhaps this explains why only one-third of the colonists wholeheartedly supported the colonial cause.

<sup>1</sup>Henry Steele Commager in the Introduction to *The Lost War*, edited by Marion Balderston and David Syrett (New York: Horizon Press, 1975), ix.

In this lesson, students interpret a list of possible explanations for the colonial victory for homework. In class, they rank these factors in order of importance and write their own thesis accounting for the American victory. To conclude the lesson, they list the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1783) and infer from the treaty why the British negotiators refused to sit for Benjamin West’s group portrait of the signers of the Treaty of Paris.

### Procedure

1. Ask students to predict which team would win if their high school football team played the Cleveland Browns (substitute the name of the nearest pro football team). Point out that in the interest of fairness contestants are usually “matched”; for example, wrestling has weight divisions for competitors. In the “contest” between the American colonies and England the “match” was unequal. Use material in the Notes to the Teacher to illustrate this position. You may wish to point out the similarity between America’s role in Viet Nam and England’s position in the Revolution.
2. Distribute **Handout 9**, and have students complete Part A for homework.

#### Suggested responses: Part A

- (1) *The government was primarily concerned with keeping the balance of power on the continent and considered the West Indies more valuable than the American colonies. Individual soldiers focused on their own promotions within the ranks, and foreign mercenaries fought for pay more than victory.*
- (2) *Documents, pamphlets, and other propaganda made the cause a moral crusade and led to more enlistments in the army.*

- (3) *Students might cite the British failure to implement the three-pronged plan for capturing Albany or leaving Princeton defended by Hessian mercenaries.*
  - (4) *The choice of George Washington as commander-in-chief gained southern support for the war, and Benjamin Franklin and other diplomats gained foreign support for the colonies.*
  - (5) *The long distance between England and America made mobilization difficult, and the colonists had a better knowledge of the territory.*
  - (6) *The French, having been recently defeated by England in the French and Indian War, desired revenge and an opportunity to recapture lost land.*
  - (7) *Students might cite the fateful march of the British from Concord to Boston and the guerrilla tactics of Francis Marion, Andrew Pickens, Ethan Allen, Thomas Sumpter, or George Rogers Clark.*
  - (8) *The financial support of the Dutch, the military support of foreign generals, the Spanish military and financial support, and the declaration of neutrality by other European powers all aided the colonies.*
  - (9) *The financial support of men such as Robert Morris and Haym Salomon proved critical for a government that did not have the power to tax.*
3. Have students complete Part B in small groups. You may want to instruct them to write in pencil so that they can change

answers if the arguments of other students in the group prove convincing. Have them try to reach a consensus in the group. Their responses will, of course, vary.

4. In a large-group session, try to reach a class consensus. You will probably want to tally students' rankings on the chalkboard. After students have completed their discussion, point out that many historians argue the primacy of foreign aid in the American victory and ask to what extent the students find that argument reasonable.
5. Have students complete Part C as a large-group activity.

**Suggested responses: Part C**

- (1) *a. Britain recognized American independence; b. the new United States gained all British territory east of the Mississippi except Florida; c. the United States got fishing rights off the coast of Newfoundland; d. both sides were allowed to collect legitimate debts from citizens in the other country; e. Congress would not prevent restitution of property confiscated from British subjects. (Realistically, however, there was little hope of a return of British property since much of it had already been sold or distributed to soldiers.)*
- (2) *The British found the terms so humiliating and inconsistent with their position as the dominant power in the world that the negotiators refused to sit for the portrait.*

## The American Revolution: The Upset of the Eighteenth Century

### Part A

“How did it happen that thirteen colonies on the fringe of civilization, as it were, with perhaps half a million males of fighting age, without military resources, without leaders, without even a national government, a national army, a national treasury, brought the mightiest of European powers to its knees, and wrung from it concessions beyond the avarice of conquerors?”<sup>2</sup>

This summary explains the attitude of most Britons and, indeed, many colonists of the 1770s. Still, the American rebels won the war. Listed below are nine factors often cited to explain the American victory. For homework, use your textbook and outside materials as reference to cite at least one bit of evidence to support each of these indications of hope for the colonists.

1. British governmental and personal concerns with things other than the war effort
2. A belief that the colonial cause of freedom and independence could carry them to victory
3. British blunders in the war
4. Effective American leadership
5. Natural and geographic advantages of the Americans
6. The French goal of revenge against Britain
7. The use of guerrilla warfare

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

8. The active support or neutrality of other European powers

9. The help of American financiers

Part B. In your small group, discuss the factors that explain the American victory in the American Revolution. Place the nine possible reasons for the colonial victory in the diagram below in descending order of importance. Try to reach a consensus on your answers.

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9

Write below your own thesis accounting for the American victory in the Revolution.

---

---

---

---

Part C. Use your textbook to find five major provisions of the Treaty of Paris (1783) and list them below.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

e. \_\_\_\_\_

To conclude the lesson, study the painting below by American artist, Benjamin West. Explain why it is fitting, in view of the terms of the treaty, that the British negotiators refused to sit for this group portrait.



Figure 9.1 The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del., *American Commissioners of the Preliminary Peace Negotiations with Great Britain*, © 1783 by Benjamin West.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---