Revolutionary War

1760
King George III ascended to the throne of England.

1763
England and France signed the Treaty of Paris, ending the French and Indian War. Canada and the continent east of the Mississippi River were added to Great Britain's growing empire.

1765
In March, to pay for some of the costs of the French and Indian War, Lord George Grenville asked the English Parliament to impose the Stamp Act. This was the first direct tax on the American colonies. All printed materials were taxed, including newspapers, pamphlets, bills, legal documents, licenses, almanacs, dice and playing cards. (It actually followed another bill from 1764, the Sugar Act, which put taxes on the import of foreign refined sugar, raised the import taxes on foreign textiles, coffee, indigo, and Madeira wine, and banned the import of rum and French wines). The Stamp Act was scheduled to go into effect on November 1, 1765. In July, the first groups of Sons of Liberty were formed in a number of colonial towns. These were underground organizations of people who opposed the Stamp Act. The Sons of Liberty decided to use violence and intimidation to fight against the Stamp Act. Soon after, groups of Sons of Liberty burned stamps and threatened stamp agents. In Boston, the Sons of Liberty were led by Samuel Adams. Samuel Adams attacked the Act in the city's newspapers. On August 14, the Sons of Liberty hung a puppet that looked like the stamp agent on an elm tree. (That tree was named Liberty Tree and was cut down by the English troops in 1775).
1766
The Stamp Act was repealed in March, but on the same day Parliament passed the Declaratory Act, asserting its right to make laws binding on the colonies.

1767
In June, the English Parliament decided to cut British land taxes. In order to make up for the difference and to continue to finance their troops in the Colonies, Charles Townshend, the British Treasurer, promised to tax the colonists.

Unlike the Stamp Act, the Townshend Act created a tax on goods the colonists imported, such as paper, glass, paints, and even tea shipped from England.

The bill also established a board of customs collectors in Boston.

The money collected from these import taxes was used to pay the salaries of these British colonial officials. This made them more independent of the colonial legislatures and better able to enforce British orders and laws.

1768
In October, British troops arrived in Boston to enforce the customs laws.

1770
Five workers were killed by British troops following a small riot in Boston. This incident was promptly named the Boston Massacre, and further infuriated the colonists.

1773
Parliament passed yet a new law, the Tea Act, establishing a monopoly of the tea trade under the powerful East India Company.

The outraged colonists tried to prevent EIC tea from reaching the markets in Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Charleston. Then on December 16, a group of men disguised as Indians boarded three tea ships in Boston and dumped 342 tea chests in the water.

This episode, known as the Boston Tea Party, generated a series of retaliation laws known as the Intolerable Acts.
1774

The Intolerable Acts were enacted in 1774 and united radicals and conservatives in a unanimous hatred of England and the British crown.

The Quartering Act, established on March 24th, required the colonial authorities to provide housing and supplies for the British troops.

The Administration of Justice Act, which became effective on May 20, barred British soldiers from being tried in the colonies, no matter what abuses and crimes they might commit.

The Massachusetts Government Act, which also took effect on May 20, 1774, restricted town meetings to once a year unless the governor approved more. The Massachusetts assembly could not meet, and all officials, juries, and sheriffs would be appointed by the governor from then on.

The Quebec Act was also established on May 20, and extended the Canadian borders to cut some of the territory of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia.

But the most obnoxious of the Intolerable Acts was the Boston Port Bill, which closed all trade through the port of Boston until the people of Boston paid for the tea that had been destroyed. Preceded by a number of punishing laws, it went into effect on June 1, 1774.

In September 1774, the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. It was attended by 56 people from 12 colonies (Georgia agreed to support any plans made at this meeting). A petition to King George III was approved, called the Declaration of Rights and Grievances. It called for fair treatment more than for independence. However, a boycott of trade with England was also approved and the Intolerable Acts were discussed and criticized.

(The leaders of the congress included Samuel Adams, George Washington, Peyton Randolph, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, John Jay, Joe Galloway, and John Randolph.)

1775

In April shots were fired at Concorde Bridge and at Lexington.

A force of 700 to 800 British was attacked by a small group of minutemen as they were marching from Boston to Concorde to seize and destroy all military stores they could find. As they arrived in Lexington under the command of Major John Pitcairn, the small force of minutemen opened fire on the “lobster backs.” The English returned fire and killed eight men.

As the militia dispersed, the British regrouped and continued to Concorde.

But the alarm was given on the American side, bells, guns, and drums called minutemen and militia to fight.

As the British troops entered Concorde, they were attacked on all sides and forced to retreat to Boston, leaving behind 273 casualties.
Congress (the Second Continental Congress had convened in May 1775) tried to organize the militia swarming around Boston, where the British troops were placed under siege, and sent Captain Benedict Arnold of the Connecticut militia, to take Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain as a colonel of the Massachusetts militia.

That same month, a British force arrived in the New World. In August, the Continental Army was routed at Long Island, New York.

In the beginning, the English strategy seemed simple: to capture a few coastal cities, to chase the rebels into the interior, and then to burn a few small cities as examples, crushing by force any ideas of further rebellion.

The war had started. George Washington was given command of the Continental Army, a force of about 14,000 men lacking discipline, organization, supplies, training, and strategy.

But before Washington could reach Cambridge and take command of the army, a major battle erupted.

Trying to secure Boston in June, General Gage, assisted by Generals William Howe, Henry Clinton and John Burgoyne, attempted to take an elevation called Bunker Hill, and were crushed by the American militia under the command of Colonel William Prescott and General Israel Putnam.

Although they succeeded in taking Bunker Hill, the English lost 1,100 of their 2,400 men.

1776

In January, Thomas Paine published his book *Common Sense*, which became an instant success and pushed the colonies further towards independence.

Some writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the later negatively by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.

Tom Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776

On July 4 Thomas Jefferson issued the Declaration of Independence.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.— That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, […]

[...] A Prince (George III) whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people. […]

[...] all political connection between them (the United Independent States) and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved [...].

*Unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America*, In Congress, July 4, 1776.

Now the English strategy became more elaborate:

To attack in the south through the Carolinas, where there were many loyalists, and march north; To attack the north, through Canada, also generally loyal to the king, and march south via Lake Champlain; Finally, in a coordinated attack, to attack Pennsylvania through New York, joining the southern and northern invasion forces.
In the southern theater of operations, the British forces of General Clinton moved to North Carolina with General Cornwallis and Admiral Parker.

A Loyalist army was quickly assembled, mainly formed from recent Scottish immigrants. But in February, a group of patriots prevented them from joining the British troops at Moore Creek bridge, near Wilmington.

The British offensive had to be rerouted to Charleston, instead of the planned Cape Fear. In Charleston the British were miserably defeated, and in June, they sailed for New York, postponing the southern invasion for the next three years.

In the northern theater of operations, the British forces, reinforced with 13,000 fresh men consisting of German mercenaries and Indians and under the command of General Carleton, were preparing to take control of Lake Champlain. On the American side, General Benedict Arnold managed to get 15 vessels of various types on the Lake under almost impossible conditions.

For George Washington, the situation was again very difficult. Insufficient resources and lack of major victories made it almost impossible to keep the Continental Army fit for war. With the onset of Winter, a generally low morale was making it especially difficult to gather men and provisions, and disease and desertion were taking a much higher toll than the English troops.

In August, the British had attacked New York with a force of 32,000 men, mostly fresh troops arrived from England, and almost 300 ships. To defend the city, Washington had 19,000 poorly armed men.

The Declaration of Independence had created much distress, and many feared the victory of the English. Treason, desertion, and refusal to sell supplies to Washington’s troops made the situation worse.

General George Washington spent the second half of 1776 in retreat. First from Brooklyn Heights, he escaped over the East River, saving his army from annihilation in late August. George Washington continued to withdraw, first to Lower Manhattan, then to the White Plains and to North Castle, then on to Pennsylvania, always with Cornwallis on his heels. Washington faced a general lack of supplies, the low morale of his troops, and rampant desertions.

Something had to be done quickly and, in December, he attacked the Hessians at Trenton, subduing a force of 1,000 troops with only 5 casualties. Then, when Cornwallis attacked Trenton, Washington escaped again, outflanking his army, and beating a British force that was marching to join Cornwallis.

These two victories greatly raised the morale among the rebels, and brought the necessary support for the survival of the Continental Army during the following Winter.

In December, Congress sent Benjamin Franklin to France for help.
Hostilities resumed in the Spring of 1777. While Howe retreated to New York, in the northern theatre a British force led by John Burgoyne took Fort Ticonderoga in July, inflicting a devastating loss to the Americans.

But France began its involvement in the conflict, and the Marquis de Lafayette arrived in America.

Then, in September, Washington was defeated at Brandywine and Germantown.

In October, the British forces took Philadelphia, but the American army defeated Burgoyne at Saratoga, changing the course of the Revolutionary War.

Although the Revolutionary War was mainly fought on land, navies played a very important role.

Facing a general refusal of the colonists to supply its troops, the English needed to be supplied from England. But disorganization, nepotism, incompetence, and corruption eventually took a toll on the logistics.

Without efficient supplies, the British started to lose ground. The Navy was controlled by the Admiralty, but the Navy’s supplies were controlled by the Treasury, and the coordination between these two powerful bureaucracies was difficult. As if this was not bad enough, the Navy press gangs preyed on their own transports.

By the 18th century, commercial vessels and warships were very different things.

The English had always avoided the building of naval shipyards in the colonies. Americans knew how to make excellent commercial craft, but had no experience in building war vessels. England, on the other hand, had a very powerful navy and a long shipbuilding tradition.

Americans had to learn everything. In the beginning they captured a few merchant vessels with small craft.

Then, in late 1775, Congress commissioned 4 warships. However, the English managed to burn shipyards and destroy ships before they were finished.

In total 8 vessels were built or outfitted, including the Wasp, Hornet, and Fly.

The frigate Randolph managed to escape destruction by the British. However, she was destroyed by an explosion during an engagement with the H.M.S. Yarmouth. Only 4 men survived, 311 died.

But American privateers proved to be a much more difficult problem. They preyed so intensely on British commercial vessels that the tradesmen community in England started to lobby for the end of the war and the recognition of the United States.

Although there were no major naval battles during this war, privateers (about 2,000 letters of marque were issued during the conflict) captured some 600 British vessels and took an estimated $18,000,000 of property.
1778

In February, France signed a treaty of alliance with the United States and turned the Revolutionary War into a world conflict.

The British evacuated from Philadelphia and moved to New York in June.

After Saratoga, the war was won in the north, and England resumed its attacks in the south after being unable to take the middle colonies.

On December, the British captured Savannah.

1779

Soon after the capture of Savannah, the British captured Augusta.

In June, Spain declared war on England. A French force under Admiral d’Estaing failed to conquer Savannah and the war stalled until the winter.

Congress failed, yet again, to supply Washington’s army, and the cold took a heavy toll on his troops.

On August 14, 1779, John Paul Jones, a 62-year old navy officer with a long record of victories against English vessels, set sail from France on the frigate Bonhomme Richard to cruise around the British Isles. Jones captured 16 merchant vessels and sailed back to France.

On September 23, he encountered the British Baltic fleet under convoy of the H.M.S. Serapis and the H.M.S. Countess of Scarborough. That night, during a four hour engagement with the English, Jones captured the Serapis. The Bonhomme Richard sank next morning, and Jones sailed back to Holland on the Serapis for repairs.

1780

In the Spring of 1780, General Clinton took Charleston. General Lincoln lost his entire force of 5,000, leaving Cornwallis free to carry out his southern campaign.

Then, against Washington’s advice, Congress appointed General Gates to lead the attack against Cornwallis. Following a series of incredible blunders, Gates lost half of his army and was relieved.

Cornwallis prepared for the invasion of the north. He moved in three parallel lines, one under his own command, and the others under Colonel Tarleton, and Major Ferguson.

However, when Ferguson’s entire army was destroyed by a band of 900 Scottish-Irish yeomen at the border of the Carolinas. Cornwallis called off the invasion.

A French force of 5,000 fresh men under the command of the Comte de Rochambeau arrived in the United States.
By January, General Morgan, with 1,000 Continentals and militia, had routed and destroyed Colonel Tarleton’s army.

Cornwallis was alone, and Generals Greene and Morgan attacked him and forced his retreat to Virginia. Then, Greene marched to the Carolinas to retake possession.

As Cornwallis raided freely in Virginia with Benedict Arnold (who had passed to the British side), Washington sent Lafayette to meet him. Cornwallis withdrew to Yorktown so that he could keep in contact with General Clinton in New York.

But Lafayette followed him in August. Washington joined Lafayette with the forces of Rochambeau and a large fleet under the command of Comte de Grasse.

An English fleet under the command of Admiral Graves tried to break the blockade in September, but was defeated.

On October 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered his entire army.

England acknowledged the loss of its colonies in September 1783 by the Treaty of Versailles. In December, Washington gave up the command of the Continental Army and went home.

In Europe, the ideals that inspired the rebellion against the British monarchy determined a series of events that eventually ended the French absolute monarchy.

On July 14, an angry mob stormed the Bastille.

On August 27, the French National Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Men.

These events lead to the execution of King Louis XVI on January 21, 1793.


See: Additional texts in the Readings Volume.