



The American Revolution 1763 - 1783: Separation and Divorce

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In my last lecture I described to you the discovery of North America and its colonisation by the English and later the Scottish. This evening I want to discuss their separation and divorce of the colonists from their countrymen. This was the American Revolution, or the War of American Independence, the British term. Fundamentally, the war was fought over a constitutional issue: who was to control the American colonies, the British Parliament or the colonies' own legislative assemblies? Who was to govern, and who was to choose the governors? British attempts to impose a control, which had not before been enforced, caused the war, but it is probable that even had there not been a war, separation was inevitable. The island could not for long have controlled the continent. Or as a French officer said in 1782, after the fighting was over: 'No opinion was clearer than that though the people of America might be conquered by well disciplined European troops, the country of America was unconquerable.'

The American Revolution is the American Foundation Myth, a tale of unity and valour, of right versus wrong, of the simple, God-fearing American fighting for his home against the arrogant Briton. But things were infinitely more complicated. First of all, this was a civil war, not only between the British and their colonies, but also in America itself, between the Loyalists and the rebels, or Patriots, as they were often stylised. As with all civil wars, it was nasty, ferocious and bloody. And secondly, whilst for the colonies this was a local conflict, for Britain it soon became a global war, in which Britain was ranged alone against the maritime powers, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Within less than three years, war in America had, for Britain, become almost a sideshow, as she defended her Empire around the globe.

The story begins in 1763, at the end of the Seven Years War - or the French and Indian War, as it was known in America. Britain emerged from her third war against France and her allies in seventy-five years almost unimaginably victorious. From France she took her North American possessions, which included Quebec, and all of her land east of the Mississippi River except New Orleans; she took the French possessions in India; she took the West Indian sugar islands; she took Senegal in Africa; and she recovered Minorca. From Spain she gained Florida. She also gained their enmity, along with that of the other European Powers. She was perceived as a dangerous threat to the Balance of Power, and as a result she was isolated. Isolation is splendid if it is your own choice, but threatening if it is not, and within three years of the beginning of the War of American Independence, Britain would be profoundly threatened: France and Spain signed an alliance with the object of invading and defeating Britain.

Meanwhile, the British had to re-organise their Empire. The map shows the North American acquisitions from France and Spain, with the former French territories labelled 'Reserved for the Indians'. Both the British and the French had fostered alliances with several of the Indian tribes, and it seemed politic to Britain that she provide them with a reason to remain friendly. Therefore she drew a Proclamation Line as shown on the map: beginning at the Gulf of the St. Lawrence River, it connected a series of mountains, from the Green Mountains in what later became Vermont, to the Adirondacks in New York, down to the Alleghenies in Virginia and Pennsylvania, to the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Carolinas, and to the Great Smokey Mountains in Georgia, with the Line continuing to the border with Florida. This meant that the land west of the mountains was closed to further white settlement. The colonists objected violently to being prevented from spilling over the mountains and settling in the new territories. And of course, it was impossible to prevent their doing so. But why should the British be so keen to support the Indians as against their own colonists? The primary reason was fear of loss of control: inland colonies would develop political and economic independence from the mother country. Coastal colonies, it was believed, could if necessary be controlled by means of the Royal Navy, but lacking navigable rivers from the coast and over

the mountains, Britain would rapidly lose its grip on those further west.

North and South of this Indian reserve, three new colonies were created for areas where white settlement already existed, Quebec for the French inhabitants of the St Lawrence Valley, and East and West Florida for the sparse Spanish population. Until there were more British settlers, they were not to have elected assemblies, as did all of the other North American colonies.

The acquisition of these new territories entailed the maintenance of an army of substantial size, both for defence and for control of the areas populated by foreigners and Indians. This was a new departure for Britain, who had previously managed to patrol her empire with a relatively small army. The average annual cost of the army in North America was £385,000, or a tenth of the Crown's disposable income: how was it to be paid? The Crown had a real problem. The Seven Years War had caused the budget deficit to balloon from £73 million in 1756 to £137 million in 1763; the annual interest on the debt alone was £5 million - and the Crown's annual income was only £8 million. At the very least, the government believed, the colonies should pay for their own defence. There was increasing conflict over who should decide how it should be paid, Parliament or the elected colonial assemblies: the fundamental question, could Parliament tax the colonies, would end in rebellion and war.

This period of British politics was one of venomous rancour, reaching heights of bitterness unequalled since the reign of Queen Anne in the early years of the century. Politics was driven by the desire for office and perquisites, and controlled by patronage. When George III came to the throne in 1760, he was determined to play an active role in politics, of course through Parliament, and he was also determined to have about him his own men. The political world was therefore torn apart in the early 1760s, as the King drove into opposition many of the ablest men in politics. These men had their own followings in the House of Commons, held together by family and patronage: Lord Rockingham, for example, had as followers about one in seven MPs, including the most celebrated orators of their time, Edmund Burke, the Irish dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and the future chief minister, Charles James Fox. They were important because the balance of power in the House was held by the independent MPs, numbering about 150 in the 1770s, who could be swayed by a convincing speech. The committed opposition in 1780, for example, numbered about a hundred in a House of 558. Politicians, loosely organised in groups around major figures, made up about a quarter of the House, the independents another quarter, and placemen, who were office-holders of one kind or another, from army colonels to those who held sinecures in the royal Household, a further 150. The manager of all of this was the Leader of the House.

The King's Chief Minister from September 1767 through to 1782, and Leader of the House from 1768, was Lord North. North was a brilliant party manager, with about 220 followers in the House, who were held together by his position as First Lord of the Treasury. The coalition led by North was a typical one of the 18th century, made up of the followers of a number of leaders and held together by the desire for office. It was, however, more stable than many, because it had the confidence of the King and a leader who was a brilliant manager of the House of Commons. Perhaps because its monopoly of power seemed so unassailable, it was frequently and bitterly attacked.

On the other side of the Atlantic, politics could be equally venomous. Most of the thirteen relevant colonies had this organisational pattern: a Governor appointed by the Crown, a Council appointed by the Governor, and an elected legislative assembly. There were variations: in Massachusetts, for example, the most radical of the colonies, there were town meetings with rights of governance and elected juries, whilst in Virginia, power was much more in the hands of the largest property-holders. One very important difference between Britain and the colonies was the franchise, the basis of which in both Britain and the colonies was the ownership of land. In Britain, those who could vote were very few, and in some constituencies there were none at all; one of most notorious was Old Sarum, which was essentially a field of sheep, with the landlord naming the MP. The dominant constitutional theory in Britain, however, justifying the existing arrangement, insisted that this system of representation was adequate for all classes, including colonists. In the colonies, however, the fact that a majority of men owned some property meant that the franchise was very widely spread. An obvious consequence was that political awareness was wide as well as deep.

Colonists had traditionally accepted this relationship, guaranteeing, it was supposed, the Englishman's rights of liberty and property. They also accepted that Parliament had the right to regulate trade. What became an increasingly critical issue was whether Parliament had the right to tax the colonists. Parliament always insisted that it did; Americans increasingly insisted that it did not. The question then became, did the Americans have to obey the legislation of Parliament, whether or not they agreed with it? Americans increasingly said they did not. And thus, the final question: was Parliament the sovereign power in the

British Empire or not? The Americans said no, and fought their way out of the Empire, with a little help from their friends.

None of us have the time this evening, even had we the inclination, to march step by step into war. So I will not describe and analyse the Molasses Act, the Sugar Act, the Quartering Act, the Quebec Act, and others, which exercised, worried, and enraged the colonists to varying degrees. I say varying degrees because it is important to remember that the rebels were very far from being a majority - indeed, in certain areas, such as New York and the South, they were very much in the minority once fighting began. Nevertheless, even those who did not wish to fight the British could object to some of their activities. I will limit myself to the Stamp Act, the Townshend Duties, and the Boston Tea Party.

Remember that the main thrust of British policy towards the American colonies after 1763 was an attempt to raise from them the cost of the army stationed in America for their protection. Stamp duties seemed unexceptionable, as they had been levied in Britain since the seventeenth century. The Stamp Act required the payment for a stamp on almost all printed documents, property conveyances and other legal documents, newspapers, books, cargo lists for ships, playing cards and dice. During the passage of the bill in the House of Commons, the ministry developed the theme that Parliament was the supreme legislature under the Crown for the entire Empire: this argument was then and thereafter the cornerstone of the British case to tax and legislate for the colonies. The government, however, did take some pains to anticipate all reasonable objections: the tax burden was small, the money was to be paid directly to the army in America, and the tax would be administered by the Americans themselves, not by British officials.

News of the Stamp Act reached America in April 1765, and the initial reaction was despair. It was only in late May that the Virginia House of Burgesses passed the Virginia Resolves, asserting that there should be no taxation without representation. By the end of 1765 another seven colonial assemblies had voted similar declaratory resolutions. It is worth pausing here to consider why there should have been such a reaction. First of all, the colonists were used to being relatively neglected by the Crown. The colonies had their own charters, which guaranteed their elected assemblies; on the whole they governed themselves; and they themselves raised the necessary taxes and appropriated the proceeds. The custom had been that any charges levied by the Crown on the colonists, such as customs duties, were to regulate trade, not to raise revenue. Furthermore, no British government had attempted to impose an internal tax. By the Stamp Act, the Crown was doing both.

Nine colonies sent representatives to the Stamp Act Congress, which met in New York in October 1765: whilst their allegiance to the Crown and subordination to Parliament was acknowledged in general terms, the delegates claimed that only their own assemblies had the power to tax them. In many localities, the threats of ordinary citizens, or the mob, ensured that by 1 November, no American official was willing to enforce the stamp duty. The widespread initial hesitation had reflected the colonial awareness of the enormity of the challenge being made to Great Britain, yet the failure of recent attempts at pleas and petitions to Parliament made resistance appear to be the sole method of changing Parliament's attitude. Refusal to pay the tax was supported by a boycott of British goods, led by the port cities of New York, Philadelphia and Boston. The boycott was strictly, and sometimes violently, enforced.

News of the resistance to the Stamp Act gradually reached Britain during the second half of 1765. Some form of conciliation was inevitable, since the duty would be impossible to enforce in the face of such hostility. The problem was that surrender would be unacceptable to political opinion in Britain, since it was too obviously a surrender to the mob. The dilemma was resolved by William Pitt the Elder, who successively urged complete repeal. This was accompanied in March 1766 by the Declaratory Act, which reaffirmed the relationship of Parliament to the colonies: '...be it declared... That the said colonies and plantations in America have been, are, and of right ought to be, subordinate unto, and dependent upon the imperial crown and parliament of Great Britain; and that the King's majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the lords spiritual and temporal, and commons of Great Britain, in parliament assembled, had, hath, and of right ought to have, full power and authority to make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the colonies and people of America, subjects of Great Britain, in all cases whatsoever.'

What was the reaction to this crisis and its resolution? On the whole, British political opinion was not satisfied with the face-saving formal claim of the Declaratory Act, and there remained a strong popular demand for revenue raised in the colonies. Politicians were now characterised according to their attitudes towards America: the hardliners, such as the current Chief Minister, Lord Grenville, and his supporters, were called 'Stamp Men'; the followers of Lord Rockingham, the largest single political group, were pragmatic, championing Parliamentary sovereignty in theory but not exercising it in practice; and there

were a few supporters of America, but even they disagreed with some of the colonial views. In America, trust was broken, and the colonists would thereafter regard any governmental policy with suspicion; furthermore, those colonial politicians closely identified with support for Great Britain found their influence weakened or destroyed.

George III's new ministry in 1767 was led by Pitt, now Lord Chatham, with Charles Townshend as Chancellor of the Exchequer. The new government asserted Parliamentary sovereignty over the colonies, and the resumption of American taxation formed part of that policy. Townshend's intention of using customs dues to raise revenue exploited what most politicians thought was American acquiescence in 'external' taxation. In April, Townshend took a fateful decision and altered the aim of his proposed taxation. Rather than use the revenue to support the army in America, he proposed to free the administration of government in America from financial dependence on colonial assemblies, by paying the salaries of governors, judges and other officials out of the tax. The final list of the duties, the most important of which was that on tea, was published in June 1767. Americans were alarmed: first of all, the main purpose of their assemblies had been to tax and spend: would they no longer have a purpose? And secondly, an important means of controlling the governor was their responsibility for paying his salary; Townshend proposed to take away this power.

American opposition to the Townshend duties grew slowly. Although there was no effective trade boycott for two years, there were increasing numbers of pamphlets and newspaper articles arguing against both the duties and the argument of the Declaratory Act. The Massachusetts Assembly argued the same in a Circular Letter in February 1768, acknowledging that Parliament was the 'supreme legislative power over the whole empire', but nevertheless asserting that taxation by the Townshend Duties was an infringement of the rights of American subjects because they were not represented in Parliament. On the orders of London, all of the colonial governors dissolved the assemblies in order to prevent a response to the Massachusetts letter. The British sent two more regiments, about 1,000 soldiers, to Boston, which had seen increasing violence against the British and their supporters; as a result, the Bostonian defiance collapsed. The British government's strategy was to threaten and then offer concessions. The Townshend duties were repealed, with the exception of the duty on tea, which was retained in order to underline Parliamentary power.

British attempts to raise a colonial revenue in the 1760s had initiated a debate in the colonies about the constitutional relationship of the Empire, and in particular that between the centre of the Empire and the American colonies. This debate took place right through society, from the political élite to, and including, the farmers in the countryside and the urban working classes. It was not always possible for the opposition political élite to keep events under their control, and there was widespread intimidation of supporters of Britain, or even of those who were not vociferous enough in their opposition.

This intimidation was obvious when a boycott of tea was announced. Ships were prevented from unloading their cargo of tea, and on a night in December 1773, the Boston Tea Party took place, when a group of men thinly disguised as Indians dumped nearly four hundred cases, or 90,000 pounds, of tea in Boston Harbor. This was the catalyst of events by which the colonies moved from resistance to rebellion. The Tea Party was an open challenge to British authority such as had not occurred in earlier disputes, and it shocked British public opinion. The government had to act, and the result was a series of acts in 1774 known collectively in the colonies as the Intolerable or Coercive Acts. First of all, by the Boston Port Bill, Boston Harbor was to be closed until the city had paid compensation to the owners of the tea. The government saw Boston as the centre of American defiance, and thought that if it could be crushed in isolation, the opposition to Britain elsewhere would die down. In support of this was the second Act, the Massachusetts Government Act. The British government saw Massachusetts as too democratic: the Council was elected by the Assembly, not nominated by the Crown; a public meeting was the governing body in each town; and the judicial system was made up of elected juries and magistrates, making impossible the conviction of those who defied unpopular British laws. The answer was to strengthen the executive by making the Council and magistrates nominations of the Crown rather than elective, restricting town meetings to official business as determined by Crown appointees, and ending elective juries. Finally, the capital was to be moved from Boston to Salem. By the Quartering Act, the colonial governor was to have authority for billeting soldiers, although they were not to be placed in private houses.

The colonies called a Continental Congress to meet in Philadelphia in September 1774, whose brief was to decide on the best methods of challenging the legislation. A boycott of British imports and exports was decided upon, and local committees were established in counties and towns to enforce it by ostracism, and more generally by violence and intimidation, such as tarring and feathering. Events began to accelerate. In

January 1775 the Cabinet decided to send 3,000 soldiers to Boston to join the 4,000 already there under the command of General Thomas Gage. Several of the colonies, and particularly Massachusetts, had for some time been acquiring and storing guns and ammunition, and in April Gage received instructions from London to seize these stores. This had to be done secretly, but the rebels in Boston knew that something was up. The leaders were the journalist Sam Adams, the merchant John Hancock, the richest man in Boston, and the silversmith Paul Revere. On the night of 18 April, the British soldiers quietly left their barracks and marched towards Concord. A number of horsemen were awaiting a signal as to the route of march, and amongst them was Paul Revere, the most famous because of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which generations of American schoolchildren used to recite:

*'Listen, my children and you shall hear,
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five,
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.
He said to his friend, 'if the British march
By land or by sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry-arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light-
One, if by land, and two, if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country-folk to be up and to arm.'*

Revere watches, and receives the signal that the British are sailing across the Charles River.

*A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet;
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed in his flight
Kindled the land into flame with its heat.*

Revere rides through the night, warning Medford town at twelve o'clock, Lexington at one, and Concord at two, where

*one was safe and asleep in his bed
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
Who that day would be lying dead,*

*Pierced by a British musket-ball.
 You know the rest. In the books you have read
 How the British Regulars fired and fled,-
 How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
 From behind each fence and farmyard wall,
 Chasing the redcoats down the lane,
 Then crossing the fields to emerge again
 Under the trees at the turn of the road,
 And only pausing to fire and load.
 So through the night rode Paul Revere;
 And so through the night went his cry of alarm
 To every Middlesex village and farm,-
 A cry of defiance and not of fear*

And so it goes, ending with a patriotic invocation.

In its essentials, the poem is true, except that it wasn't Paul Revere: he had been stopped by British soldiers and deprived of his horse. It was a local doctor, out visiting his girl, who saw the soldiers and warned the villagers. In Concord, the men, women and children worked through the night to move the armaments to outlying farms or to bury them. The soldiers marched, shots were fired in Lexington and the first Americans killed; a battle began at the bridge in Concord, and the Redcoats, or lobster-backs, were harried by the Minutemen as they marched back to Boston. The Minutemen were typically farmers, who kept a rifle close at hand and swore to be ready to fight in one minute. Their readiness cost the British 273 men. According to the poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, it was Concord where 'the embattled farmers stood, and fired the shot heard 'round the world'. The war had begun.

Everyone knew what this meant, and the first British campaign, aimed at Boston and Massachusetts, did more to foment American resistance and unity than to subdue the rebellion. The government in London were unprepared for war: because of the perceived threat from France, it hesitated to send its forces beyond the Atlantic; besides this, ministers were trying to retrench, and were reluctant to put the army on a war footing. Gage had told the government that he needed 20,000 soldiers if he was to subdue Boston and Massachusetts, but when he struck his blow at the rebel armaments, as he had been ordered to do, there had been no preparation for a serious struggle. They hoped to hear that Gage had broken out of Boston and was subduing the countryside; what they learned instead was that there had been a battle with rebel forces outside of Boston at Bunker Hill, which the British had indeed won, but at the cost of 40% of their strength.

What about the American forces? On 10 May 1775, the Second Continental Congress met, and amongst its decisions was to establish a Continental Army; George Washington was asked to be its Commander-in-Chief. Washington had fought in the French and Indian War; he had hoped for a commission in the British Army, but was unsuccessful and returned to his estate, Mount Vernon. When the Congress met, he was a Colonel in the Virginia Militia. Washington was to prove an indifferent military strategist but a brilliant political soldier. This was vital, because he needed to retain the support of the Congress against a number of intriguing rivals, and to gain vital, if inadequate, financial support for the army. In both he was successful. The army was also a symbol of the unity of the colonies against the British, but it alone would not have been able to defeat them. The other military element was the state militias. They were sometimes involved in pitched battles alongside the army, but more often they acted as guerrillas against the British, and as police forces against the Loyalists in their own localities.

A year later, in 1776, the main British thrust shifted southwards to New York and the vulnerable Hudson and Delaware Valleys. The military results were impressive, but at the end of the year, the rebels under Washington struck back, scoring local, but well-publicised, victories over unsupported British forces at Brandywine and Trenton, New Jersey. However, superior British seapower pushed rebel troop movements

away from the populated coast, and disrupted the maritime trade that had flourished before the war, although it could not altogether prevent clandestine aid from France.

Meanwhile, the Continental Congress on 7 June began to debate the resolution of Richard Henry Lee, a delegate from Virginia, that the thirteen colonies should declare their independence. On 2 July, twelve delegations agreed, with New York abstaining. On the fourth of July, Thomas Jefferson, a Virginia plantation holder steeped in the political philosophy of John Locke, wrote a preamble, which was approved by the Congress as a statement of principles: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable 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; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.' Both its sentiments and its expression were radically different from the Declaratory Act. It was then published, and the signatories were now traitors, liable to be hanged if caught. As Benjamin Franklin famously said, 'We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.'

The year 1777 proved critical for both sides. While one British army moved south from Canada with the aim of cutting the rebellion in two, the main army in New York moved by sea to Philadelphia, the rebel capital, expecting to lure the Continental Army to a decisive battle, in which it would destroy the rebel forces. But British strategists miscalculated the speed at which their two armies could move, so that when the army from Canada was stalled by heavy resistance from the rebels, the larger army further south was unable to help it. The result was the surrender of the northern army at Saratoga, and the entry of France into the war.

France had long planned her revenge against Britain: the American victory at Saratoga was opportune, but it was not the cause. The Franco-American treaty of alliance of February 1778 specified that neither would make a separate peace with Great Britain, and that they would fight until America was fully independent. Two months later a French fleet set sail. PICTURE 4 This paralysed the Earl of Sandwich, the First Lord of the Admiralty, who feared an invasion. However, the fleet sailed to America, carrying money but not an army, where it was of little help. It departed some months later. The following year in 1779, Spain signed an alliance with France, and England now faced the united forces of the second and third largest navies in the world. In 1778 the French had had 52 ships against the British 66; in 1779, however, although the British now had 90, the combined French and Spanish fleets had 121. Two years later the Dutch joined the anti-British alliance, so that Britain's fleet of 94 was opposed by an allied fleet of 137.

Britain was now engaged in a global maritime war, and she no longer commanded the oceans. This meant that strategic decisions were tightly interrelated. While her navy was dominant, Britain could isolate one theatre of war and concentrate on the other; now, a decision to give priority to America could, for example, put the home islands at risk, or prevent the defence of India. Sea power, which had made remarkably little impression during the first phase of the war, became paramount, as the defence of the far-flung maritime empire became the strategic priority. In the circumstances, the war changed its character, and subduing the colonies became secondary to fighting France. The strategic centre shifted southwards to the rich sugar islands of the West Indies and the slave colonies of the southern mainland. The latter saw some of the most ferocious fighting of the war, as well as some of the nastiest attacks on civilians by both sides.

At the same time as changing her strategic focus, Britain embarked on a political offensive, offering to concede to the Americans on almost every issue - with the exception of independence. The Congress, although riven by internal divisions and aware that continuing the war would probably bring bankruptcy, rebuffed the British offers. Britain also began actively to recruit support amongst disaffected and war-weary Americans for the restoration of royal authority, and Georgia and the Carolinas proved susceptible when British forces began operating there in 1779. The drawback for Loyalist Americans everywhere was that the British army would advance and then withdraw, leaving them at the mercy of their rebel neighbours. The Loyalists rapidly learned discretion. Yet, when they were in the ascendant, they were equally unforgiving towards their local opponents. Civil wars can be ruthless.

During 1780, the American cause reached its nadir. Its finances had collapsed, the French alliance seemed to have added little to its strength, the American forces in South Carolina suffered devastating defeats, and the authority of the Continental Congress steadily drained away. The question asked by many was, could the Americans hold out for even another year? Fortunately for the rebel cause, Britain had its own domestic problems. In the face of the war with France, support for continuing the war in America lessened

considerably, not least because it was proving unexpectedly difficult to defeat the rebels. Furthermore, there were political upheavals at home, in Ireland and even in London, which in 1780 saw the anti-Catholic Gordon riots, the worst in London's history.

Unexpectedly for both sides, 1781 saw the decisive defeat of the British army. The army under General Cornwallis was encouraged both by its victories in the south and by American popular response, but it was frustrated by its seeming inability finally to stamp out the last bits of resistance. It dashed through North Carolina and into a trap at Yorktown on the Virginia coast. Whilst a temporarily superior French fleet cut off relief by sea, Washington and his French allies hurtled down from New York to cut off any escape by land. The army had no choice but to surrender. This did not end the war, but it brought down the government in London. As a result, opposition groups came to power, and while continuing the war against France for the following two years, the government negotiated a peace with the Americans.

Finally, in September 1783, the British signed a treaty of peace with the Americans, the Spanish and the French, while a treaty with the Dutch was signed the following May. For our purposes it is the agreement between the British and Americans which is important. Fundamentally, the British acknowledged American independence, and agreed to remove her troops. The US also received boundaries that she could accept, which included the incorporation of the land west of the mountains, and a share in the British right to navigate the Mississippi. Britain received little in exchange, other than agreement that the Americans would honour their debts and that Congress would recommend to the states that Loyalists would receive fair treatment.

And so, the first new nation - the first made nation - was born. The birth had not been easy, but given the nature of the terrain, the British were fighting against very great odds. As Wellington later wrote, 'in such a country as America, very extensive, thinly peopled, and producing but little food in proportion to their extent, military operations by large bodies are impracticable, unless the party carrying them has the uninterrupted use of a navigable river, or very extensive means of land transport, which such a country can rarely supply.' Nevertheless, had Britain retained command of the oceans, the chances were that she would have prevailed, if only because the Americans could not have received help from France. But such speculation is pretty pointless.

It took some years for the Anglo-American relationship to settle down. Indeed, they had to fight another war, the War of 1812, before Britain finally conceded that the divorce was final. Resentment in due course modulated into curiosity, and the question became, 'What is the American, this new man?' Over the nineteenth century, British travellers tried to determine the answer, and it is this social, cultural and intellectual quest that I will consider in my next lecture, on February 12th.

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