The Revolution That Should Not Have Happened

By Ed Weber

Ed Weber is a retired attorney living in his hometown of Toledo, Ohio. Educated in the public schools, he went to Denison University for his B.A. in 1953, where he was Phi Beta Kappa, and to Harvard Law School for his LL.B in 1956. In 1980 he was elected to the United States Congress, where he served for one term.

While practicing law, Ed found time to be Scoutmaster to a Boy Scout troop and to teach as an adjunct professor in the Law College of the University of Toledo. His hobbies include walking his Labradoodle a mile before breakfast each day, playing clarinet in a community band, and singing in the church choir. .

He and his wife Alice have been married for 60 years. They have three children and six grandchildren.

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By the rude bridge that arched
the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze
unfurled,
Here once the embattled
farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard
round the world.

So begins Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn," celebrating the shots exchanged by Massachusetts militia and British soldiers at Concord Bridge and Lexington Green on April 19, 1775 (now a holiday in Massachusetts, Patriot's Day), now considered the first military engagement of the American Revolutionary War.[1]

We are so familiar with the iconography of this beginning of our national story—Washington upright in a rowboat, crossing the Delaware, or "The Spirit of '76" by Archibald Willard, with its two drummers, one young and one old, marching beside a piper with a bandaged head—that it all seems right and necessary and inevitable. The ringing phrases of Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," the deliberation that produced the bold experiment of the Constitution—how can they be anything but what should have happened, what had to happen?

But suppose we take a few minutes to entertain a contrary point of view. The Battle of Concord was the beginning of a war that should not have happened. The British had blundered badly; wiser heads had not prevailed. Once begun, the war should not have been allowed to go on, but it did for more than six years, at a tremendous loss of life. 25,000 Americans died, a larger proportion of the American population than was lost in any other American war, excepting only the Civil War. And it was not inevitable at all.

The American Colonies in 1763

To understand the American Revolution, we have to look back at the year 1763. The French and Indian War, known in Europe as the Seven Years War, has just ended. France has been defeated in Canada and has been driven out of the Ohio Valley and upstate New York. It has been called the "war that made America."

At that time there were two-and-a-half million people living in the thirteen American colonies. They considered themselves to be loyal subjects of the British crown. They are not calling for independence, but they do want respect for their rights as British citizens. They and

their families before them have come to America seeking liberty, a fresh start, a better life, and in some cases freedom of religion.

It is quite a mix, with people of many kinds: the Dutch in Manhattan, the English in Virginia, the Puritans in Massachusetts, the Quakers who arrived under William Penn in Pennsylvania, Roman Catholics who arrived under Lord Baltimore in Maryland, French fur traders along the upper Ohio and in upstate New York, and the Spanish in Florida. There are the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, gentlemen of refinement and elegant women as well as rough and tumble drifters and workers barely getting by. Many are farmers. Many are ex-prisoners who traded their prison sentences to come over as indentured servants.

Each colony was under a charter from the crown and a governor appointed by the king. Each colony had an elected assembly that passed laws regulating the internal life of the colony and setting the taxes that paid the expenses of government, including the salary of the governor. But laws passed by the English Parliament always took supremacy.

America became a profit center for Britain. Mercantilism (the theory that a nation's economic policy should seek to maximize exports), exemplified in the Navigation Acts, regulated all of the colonies' trade. All imports to the American colonies had to originate in England and had to be carried on British ships while the colonies were prohibited from exporting manufactured goods. Raw materials could be exported, but only to Britain, nowhere else. All of the great white pines in the forests of New England were reserved for export to Britain for use as masts on ships built there. This was great for British manufacturers, merchants, traders, and shippers, as America was a big market. It is easy to see why Britain very badly wanted to keep America in the British empire.

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There were no colonial members of Parliament. In their need to make Parliament understand the colonies' point of view and what the colonies wanted, the colonies sent agents; today we would call them lobbyists. Parliament had no understanding of how life was being lived in America. No member of Parliament had ever visited America, and some of them thought it was mostly a land of savages. Ben Franklin was the foremost of these colonial agents, representing Pennsylvania and later one or two other colonies. He arrived in 1757 and except for two years did not come back to America until 1775.

As for Britain, 1763 was a different story. Britain's treasury had been bled dry by the war which it had fought not only in North America but also in Europe and in the islands of the Caribbean. Under the Prime Minister William Pitt, the war had been won by outspending France and Spain: by building a bigger navy and hiring mercenaries and providing whatever equipment, guns, and munitions they needed. Britain's war debt was enormous and ongoing. It would keep a force of 10,000 British soldiers in the colonies to repel the French, who still held Louisiana and the mouth of the Mississippi, if they tried to retake what they had lost.

The disastrous condition of the British exchequer brought about a series of taxes on the colonies. Britain's tax base had always been land—land taxes paid by the nobility on their large estates. That source had reached its limit, or so they believed, especially the land-owning interests in the Tory party. Now, said the British, it was only fair that the colonies pay their share of the costs of saving them from the French. British blood had been shed. General James Wolfe had died on the Plains of Abraham to take Quebec. There would be a standing army of British soldiers to block the French permanently. It was the duty of the colonies to pay their share.

The colonists did not see it the same way. American blood had also been shed. Although not as many colonial militiamen had been in the fighting, the colonials had maintained the supply lines. Roads had been built by their labor; food had been supplied from their fields. They believed their contribution to

the war effort had been the equal of what the British had expended. They were entitled to be treated as equals.

The New Taxes

Although the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 recites a long list of colonial grievances that accumulated as time went on, the focus of the dispute that came to dominate the relationship between England and its American colonies was always on taxes. As one tax failed, another took its place.

1764: the Sugar Tax, actually a tariff on a wide range of goods.

1765: the Stamp Act, replacing the Sugar Tax, requiring a government stamp on every document, every paper of any kind. The Quartering Act also went into effect in 1765, requiring the colonies to pay for the shelter and supplies of any British troops in the colony.

1767: the Townshend Acts, essentially the Sugar Tax over again. In 1770 the Townshend Acts were repealed, except for the tax on tea. The East India Tea Company was granted a monopoly on all tea imported to the colonies, to shut down any other tea coming in, especially tea getting in from the Dutch.

1774: the Coercive Acts, closing the port of Boston in retaliation for the Boston Tea Party.

There were strong voices in Parliament who could see that taxation was a no-win plan. The former prime minister, William Pitt, rose to call for the repeal of the Stamp Act and declared, “I rejoice that America has resisted.” (He was shouted down with a roar and cries of “Send him to the Tower!”) Edmund Burke spoke often for the colonies, describing Parliament’s actions as “insane.” John Wilkes and Isaac Barré, for whom the town of Wilkes-Barre in Pennsylvania is named, spoke out strongly for the colonies. Others spoke out, calling the taxes a “disgrace,” an “absurdity,” insisting the government was asserting a point of honor to prove its supremacy rather than pursuing a reasonable policy, even that the cost of collecting the taxes would turn out to be greater than the amount collected. But this opposition was disorganized and never came near to stopping the misplaced efforts to collect one or the other of the various taxes or preventing the war itself.

Without intending to, Parliament had fanned the patriotic fires in America. Parliament failed to understand that sovereignty could not be exercised without the goodwill and the voluntary desire of the colonists. Sovereignty at the point of a bayonet is not worth the cost.

The Mounting Opposition

At first there was no movement in the colonies for independence, but the passion to be a new nation slowly began and picked up steam each time Parliament and King George slammed the colonies with another tax. With each tax there was more resistance, greater public opposition, and stronger patriotic enthusiasm. In time, the force of circumstances made independence the colonists’ goal.

Public opposition to these taxes took different forms. There were public rallies, such as in Boston in 1764 where Sam Adams and James Otis stirred people up with the slogan, “No taxation without representation.” There were boycotts of English goods, so effective that factories in Britain were shut down and workers lost their jobs.

Violence erupted often. On the docks, gangs blocked ships from coming in. British customs agents were chased by mobs and ran for their lives to the safety of a British warship in Boston harbor. Buildings where the Stamp Act was being administered were burned down, as was the royal lieutenant governor's house in Massachusetts. Colonial militias refused to obey orders to put down the mobs when law and order broke down, putting more pressure on British troops. The Boston Massacre of 1770 was sparked when a mob ganged up on a British sentry; a patrol came to his rescue and fired on the crowd. Five colonials were killed.

Then came the Boston Tea Party of 1773: 340 chests of tea were dumped into Boston harbor. Similar rebellious activities occurred at other ports.

George III and his advisors decided sterner measures were in order. In June 1774, Parliament

closed the port of Boston and sent in more soldiers. This brought about real hardship in Boston. People starved, despite donations of food and money arriving from all over the colonies. Some Bostonians were forced to evacuate to stay alive. In nearby towns, militia known as the "Minutemen" began drills three times a week.

In January 1775 London ordered the arrest of Sam Adams and John Hancock, Boston's most vocal and most active opponents of the crown. They were tipped off and escaped. General Thomas Gage, military governor of the province of Massachusetts Bay, declined to pursue, instead ordering troops to take over the colonial munitions held in Concord.

As the many who later memorized Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's beloved poem know, "on the eighteenth of April, in Seventy Five," two lanterns placed in the steeple of Old North Church alerted the Minutemen that the British were coming by way of the Charles River. Paul Revere crossed in a rowboat and made his great horseback ride, sounding the alarm to the townsmen. Leaving Boston by land, William Dawes did the same. The battles at Lexington Green and Concord Bridge the next day ended with seventy-three British dead and 174 wounded, to the patriots' forty-nine dead and forty wounded.

Point of No Return

In May 1775, Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys of Vermont captured Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain. Benedict Arnold was there also, but not very welcome.

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In June 1775 was the Battle of Bunker Hill, which overlooked the Boston Harbor. There were short range cannon on the site that the British wanted to knock out. They achieved it, but at great cost: 1,054 British dead or wounded. General Gage had now suffered two major defeats and was replaced by General Howe.

All along the colonies had been to organizing. In 1765, the Stamp Act congress gathered in New York, with nine colonies represented. In 1774, the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia, and the colonies began acting collectively rather than separately. Patrick Henry rose to announce, "I am not a Virginian, but an American." A year later, the Second Continental Congress chose George Washington as commander-in-chief.

Regiments of militia from New England, New York and Pennsylvania rallied in Cambridge outside Boston. In the summer Washington came and took command. The British, now numbering 9,000 soldiers, lay low in Boston throughout the winter of 1776. At that time, Boston occupied a peninsula into the Charles River Basin; a narrow neck of land was the only way the British could get out, and that was blocked by the militia. They were supplied by their ships.

To end the stalemate, Washington needed cannons. In a herculean effort led by General Henry Knox, the cannons Ethan Allen had captured at Fort Ticonderoga were brought across the mountains, pulled by oxen trudging through the snow. In secret, they were mounted on Dorchester Heights commanding the Boston harbor before the spring thaw.

When the British discovered their changed circumstances, they were in shock. Washington had them under his thumb. The British quickly offered a deal: allow us to evacuate or we will put Boston to the torch. On March 17, in Boston still celebrated as "Evacuation Day" in conjunction with St. Patrick's Day, the 9,000 British soldiers sailed off on 125 ships. Boston was redeemed. The Continentals had triumphed. The war was on, and there was no turning back.

How could the war have been avoided?

It would have been simple enough for Parliament to drop any idea of laying taxes on the colonies to pay the war debt, although of course that would have left Britain's budget problem still in need of a solution.

Colonial outrage over "taxation without representation" could have been allayed by making colonial representatives members of Parliament. Early on, Franklin had advocated this and believed it would satisfy the colonies. Representation in Parliament was never offered, however, and the Stamp Act Congress, convinced that the colonial representatives would always be outvoted anyway, never mentioned it again.

Perhaps, though, some sort of federation could have been agreed upon. This would happen in Canada in 1867 when it achieved status as a dominion in the British empire. At first, most Americans wanted to stay in the empire. Franklin's objective in 1764 was to preserve America as a part of the empire. In 1768, the Massachusetts Assembly officially disavowed any thought of independence. Even the Stamp Act Congress organized by Sam Adams and John Adams in 1765 officially proclaimed that its delegates "most ardently [desired] perpetual continuance of their ties with Britain."

What the colonies were seeking was home rule—autonomy in their affairs. In 1765 Prime Minister Grenville at one point proposed to Franklin and the other colonial agents that the British government could tell the colonies how much revenue was required for their defense, and the colonies then could raise that amount however they saw fit. By the time authority came back to the agents to accept such a plan, however, Grenville's offer was off the table.

Once it began, could the war have been ended sooner? Not without independence, and for the British independence was non-negotiable, while for the Americans there would be no negotiation without independence.

The turning-point came at Saratoga, New York on October 17, 1777, when a British army of 8,000 men surrendered, laid down their arms, and agreed to be shipped home. It was a stunning defeat. Within two weeks the French recognized the United States as a new nation. One week later, France entered the war. Britain was in disgrace.

Three British envoys acting as a peace commission came to Philadelphia with authority to give in on everything that had led to war, but not on independence. At this juncture, they would have been negotiating from weakness, but in fact no negotiations took place; the colonials would not meet unless independence was guaranteed first. Sailing home in November 1778, William Eden, one of the British commissioners wrote, "It is impossible to see what I see of this magnificent country and not go nearly mad at the long train of misconducts and mistakes by which we have lost it" (qtd. in Tuchman 224).

Three years later, his escape cut off by the French fleet on the James River, Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. It was October 17, 1781. All hostilities ended about six months later.

In November 1782, the Treaty of Paris was agreed upon. Ben Franklin, John Adams, John Jay and Henry Laurens acted for the United States. The British were insulting; no minister, peer, member of parliament, or cabinet member came to the table. A London merchant, Richard Oswald, was the only British representative.

The loss of America had been a colossal British blunder. But for King George, America was sour grapes anyway. He considered all of the Americans to be a deceitful bunch of villains, and now he was glad not to have them.

Thus happened the revolution that should not have happened. But I'm glad it did.

NOTE

[1] The author wishes to thank the editor of *The Torch* for his contributions to the final version of this article.

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