American colonials struggle against the British Empire, 1765 - 1775

- an example of paradox of repression [1]
- included innovative organizational forms/communication forms [2]

Timing

Time period notes:
Colonial agitation began in 1763 due to the Proclamation of 1763 which limited westward expansion and increased British taxation and “interference” in the colonies. Following the battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, the independence movement switched to violent revolution in mid-1775.

1765 to 1775

Location and Goals

Country: United States
Location Description: The 13 English colonies in what is now the United States. Limited actions (lobbying and letters of support) occurred in British cities.

Goals:

Initially the movement wanted a return to the status quo before the French and Indian War, when they were left in “salutary neglect.” The movement did not fully unite behind the goal of independence until after the decade-long nonviolent campaign concluded in favor of the War of Independence and the Declaration in 1776.

For much of the decade, therefore, the movement demanded representation in Parliament, the repeal of tax and other laws considered repressive, and a lessening of the effectiveness of British rule in the colonies.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
032. Taunting officials
038. Marches
044. Mock funerals—including one at which the activists rang church bells, lowered flags, and held a
funeral procession for “Liberty’s death.” At the cemetery, the activists discovered that Liberty was alive
and buried the Stamp Act instead, then celebrated Liberty’s reviva
047. Assemblies of protest or support
055. Social boycott
071. Consumers’ boycott
090. Revenue refusal—publishing newspapers without buying required stamps
122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies—refusal to use colonial courts
reduced their frequency

Methods in 2nd segment:

001. Public speeches
004. Signed public statements
006. Group or mass petitions
015. Group lobbying
032. Taunting officials
038. Marches
047. Assemblies of protest or support
055. Social boycott
071. Consumers’ boycott
090. Revenue refusal
122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 3rd segment:

001. Public speeches
004. Signed public statements
038. Marches
047. Assemblies of protest or support
055. Social boycott
071. Consumers’ boycott
122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
135. Popular nonobedience
179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 4th segment:

001. Public speeches
047. Assemblies of protest or support
055. Social boycott
071. Consumers’ boycott
079. Producers’ boycott
081. Traders’ boycott
• 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
• 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
• 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
• 135. Popular nonobedience
• 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 055. Social boycott
• 071. Consumers’ boycott
• 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
• 079. Producers' boycott
• 081. Traders' boycott
• 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
• 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
• 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
• 135. Popular nonobedience
• 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 055. Social boycott
• 071. Consumers’ boycott
• 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
• 079. Producers' boycott
• 081. Traders' boycott
• 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
• 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies
• 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
• 135. Popular nonobedience
• 179. Alternative social institutions

Segment Length:
each segment is about 20 months or .66 years.

Classifications
Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:
Many American colonists and other groups were especially involved at certain points. It should be noted that many American colonists opposed independence at various stages New England merchants and frontier colonists.

**Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

**Leaders:**

Benjamin Franklin, who used pseudonyms to speak out against the British and lobbied extensively overseas for the colonies.

George Washington, whose distinguished service in the French and Indian War gave him a lot of respect in the colonies.

Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, James Otis, Thomas Paine and other radicals who used pamphlets and meetings to stir up opposition to the British. Henry and Paine were also leaders in their legislatures (Virginia and Massachusetts respectively).

The American independence movement is notable for the fact that no king or dictator ever ran it or resulted from it. Very successful institution building and strong ideological adherence to the idea that no one should be a king ensured this.

**Partners:**

Partners are hard to ascertain in this case because the taxes touched nearly every part of American colonial society. While some groups, such as New England merchants, participated initially due to frustration over the Stamp Act, they soon became a leading part of the movement, as evidenced by their involvement in the boycotts against other acts and participation of many Bostonians in the Boston Tea Party.

**External allies:**

The colonists excelled at convincing undecided individuals to join their side. For example, merchants in the UK protested the Stamp Act to members of Parliament after the American boycott of British imports squeezed their business. Some members of Parliament believed that forcing the colonies to remain with Great Britain against their will would only drive the colonies to the side of Britain’s enemy, the French. Similarly, some French people helped the colonists either out of idealism or in hopes of eroding British power.

**Involvement of social elites:**

For lawyers and merchants, the Stamp Act was incredibly expensive because it required they pay a tax for every court document or documentation of an import agreement. Many legislatures, which were largely filled with the upper class due to voting restrictions, passed resolutions condemning the various acts and many joined in resistance groups.

**Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Merchants and colonists. The Sons of Liberty
- Moderate colonists who agreed with John Dickinson’s Declaration of Rights and Grievances
- Some members of parliament
• a radical organization

Groups in 2nd Segment:

• Increasing numbers of British merchants hurt by boycott

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

(movement lasted 10 years

After this, each of these groups continued to increase in size, except perhaps the British merchants, who appear to have stayed quiet when boycotts weren’t hurting their business

Segment Length:
each segment is about 20 months or .66 years.

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The British Empire, its colonial agents, appointed governors of the colonies, Parliament

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Repeals of several acts of Parliament following colonists’ opposition and campaigns

Campaigner violence:
Also very limited, because most colonists still saw the British as fellow countrymen and were aware that violence would alienate their supporters in Parliament and in the colonies and the UK.

Repressive Violence:
Limited (to the credit of the British), but every act of repressive violence enormously benefited the colonists. The most famous incident of repressive violence was the Boston Massacre, during which 5 protestors died after British soldiers fired on a large group of colonists that had been taunting the British and throwing snowballs at them.

British efforts to crack down on the movement tended to be very unsuccessful. As General Thomas Gage realized when asked to put down a protest will military force, “tho a fire from the fort might disperse the mob, it would not quell them.”

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
4 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Total points:
8 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:
Substantial unity on the goal of independence was not clear until July 4, 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia. For the period of the nonviolent campaign, the movement's goals had largely to do with repealing oppressive acts of Parliament and reducing the effectiveness of British rule in the colonies, which arguably succeeded to a fairly high degree.

The 13 English colonies in North America were established and grew during the 17th and 18th centuries. During most of this time, the colonists lived under what historians have termed “salutary neglect,” meaning that the English government mostly left them alone and the colonies prospered under these conditions.

From 1754 to 1763, British soldiers and colonists alongside several Native American tribes fought against the French and tribes allied with them in the French and Indian War. This war was very expensive for England, which decided to leave armies stationed in the colonies and restrict westward expansion with the Proclamation of 1763, to prevent inciting other tribes.

To pay for the stationing of soldiers in the colonies, many colonists had to house and feed soldiers. Soldiers' pay was reduced, which encouraged the soldiers to enter the local labor market and compete with unemployed colonists for jobs. Soldiers, securely housed and fed, often offered to work for less than the living wage, arousing resentment among working class colonists.

Parliament imposed a series of taxes on the colonies. These taxes, enacted without assent from the colonies, galvanized opposition to the British and led to colonial resistance. Further, British soldiers and officials tended to look down on American colonists and treat them poorly. This change in events led many colonists to wish for a return to the period of salutary neglect and to question their lack of representation in Parliament.

With each act by Parliament, opposition grew to the British control. The Stamp Act of 1765 in particular angered many colonists, who increasingly began to see themselves as Americans during the campaign against the act. The Stamp Act placed a tax on all documents, ranging from trade documents to playing cards to court documents.

Legislatures in the colonies passed resolutions against the Stamp Act, merchants in New England agreed to boycott British exports, and many Americans began to wear American-made clothes. Colonial organizations made up of activists who called themselves patriots began to form. A year after the act went into effect, Parliament was forced to repeal it when the patriots' organizations succeeded in making the act unprofitable, harming transatlantic trade, and convincing (and coercing) many officials not to participate in the act.

The Townshend Act of 1767 imposed duties on the colonists' imports. The movement's response was to encourage colonists to refuse to buy the goods. Smuggling grew and Britain established admiralty courts, where smugglers could be tried without a jury.

The growing refusal of colonists to buy British imports became an important stimulus to the quality and capacity of their own manufacturing. By 1773 this became formalized in a number of localities by making agreements not to import or buy British goods.

In the late 1760s the tension between the King's soldiers and colonists grew, often reflected in street fights even though the organized resistance movement relied on nonviolent struggle and colonists sometimes tried to control outbreaks of random violence. There was a notable scarcity of violent attacks on governmental officials, even those trying to enforce hated measures like the Stamp Act.
In Boston in 1770 an incident of tension in the street panicked a group of British soldiers who opened fire on the crowd, hitting eleven and killing five. Patriots’ groups called this the Boston Massacre and widely publicized it.

The Townshend Act was partially repealed, but Parliament next decided to pass the Tea Act. To protest this act, a group of colonists snuck onto a British ship carrying tea and dumped it into Boston Harbor during the Boston Tea Party of 1773.

Parliament was infuriated by the Boston Tea Party, and in 1774 passed four laws which the American colonists called the Intolerable Acts. These bills closed Boston Harbor until the colonists repaid the East India Company for the tea spilled in the Harbor, put Massachusetts under direct British control, allowed British soldiers and officials to be tried outside of the colonies (where few witnesses could afford to travel to testify against them), and allowed British governors to force colonists to take soldiers in their homes.

These acts were intended to make an example out of Massachusetts, but instead unified the colonies even further by moving moderates to a more anti-British position. Boston's economy was sea-based and the closing of the harbor reportedly led to starvation. People in other colonies rallied to send food and supplies to Massachusetts.

In 1973-74 an increasing number of counties and towns were organizing themselves independently of British rule, adding a refusal to export American goods to Britain alongside the growing refusal to import British goods. Confidence grew that commercial coercion could be effective. Some official courts closed for lack of business because the colonists created their own alternatives; others became less active.

American colonial resistance leaders agreed to meet at the First Continental Congress in autumn, 1774.

British power in the colonies was disintegrating rapidly. The governor of Massachusetts Bay reported in early 1774 that all official legislative and executive power was gone. By October 1774 the legal government in Maryland had virtually abdicated. In South Carolina the people were obeying the Continental Association instead of the British. Virginia Governor Dunmore wrote to London in December 1774 that it was counter-productive for him to issue orders because it only made more obvious people's refusal to obey them.

During its meeting the First Continental Congress adopted a plan for further nonviolent struggle; scholar Gene Sharp believes that had the plan been followed instead of the armed struggle that became its substitute, the colonies might have become free sooner and with less bloodshed.

Following the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775 the movement turned to armed struggle. The preceding 10 years of boycotts and many other methods considerably loosened the bonds that tied the colonies to the mother country. The nonviolent struggle encouraged an independent economy, alternative organizations for governance, and a sense of shared American identity.

Whatever future scholarship may reveal about the chance of the colonies achieving their independence nonviolently, many historians believe that the decade-long campaign allowed the Americans to build parallel institutions that ensured an orderly and democratic transition to independence following the American Revolutionary War.

Research Notes
Influences:
Enlightenment thinking had a profound impact on the movement. The colonists were also inspired by the Magna Carta and other British advances in democratic governance.

Sources:


Additional Notes:
Because the decade-long nonviolent campaign of the colonists has been overshadowed by the more celebrated revolutionary war which took its place, this case is more dependent than most on the scholarly sources, both American and British, published in one book.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Back to top

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.

Creative Commons License
Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Original website design and artwork created by Daniel Hunter.

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu.

Registered users can login to the website.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/23/2020 - 01:18): https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/american-colonials-struggle-against-british-empire-1765-1775

Links:
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/example-paradox-repression