

AP US HISTORY · UNIT 3

The American Revolution

AMSCO Topic 3.5

AP US History Study Guide — Outside-Research Edition

Learning Objective: Explain how various factors contributed to the American victory in the Revolution.

Historical thinking skills this guide targets: causation (why the Americans won a war they were favored to lose), comparison (Patriot vs. Loyalist vs. Native American experience), and continuity/change (how the army and the war's character shifted 1775–1783).

First Continental Congress (September 1774)

- Called in response to the Intolerable Acts; all colonies except Georgia sent delegates to Philadelphia.
- Most delegates wanted to restore the pre-1763 relationship with Britain, **not** independence.
- **Delegate spectrum:** Radicals (Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, John Adams) → Moderates (George Washington, John Dickinson) → Conservatives (John Jay, Joseph Galloway) → Loyalists (unrepresented).
- **Joseph Galloway's Plan** (like the 1754 Albany Plan, a union within the British Empire) failed by just one vote.
- Instead, Congress:
- Endorsed the **Suffolk Resolves** (repeal the Intolerable Acts; resist via military prep and boycotts)
- Passed the **Declaration and Resolves** (petition to the king; still recognized Parliament's power to regulate commerce)
- Created the **Continental Association** to enforce economic sanctions/boycotts
- Agreed to reconvene in May 1775 if grievances weren't addressed

***OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO:** Galloway's plan lost by exactly one vote, and Galloway himself later defected to the Loyalists and left for England in 1778 — a useful concrete example that the radical/conservative split at the Congress was not abstract; it foreshadowed which delegates would actually choose which side once war broke out. — American Battlefield Trust, "Joseph Galloway" biography, accessed 2026.*

Fighting Begins (1775)

- **Lexington and Concord (April 18–19, 1775):** General Thomas Gage sent troops to seize colonial supplies at Concord. **Paul Revere** and **William Dawes** warned the Minutemen. First shots fired at Lexington (unclear who fired first — the "shot heard 'round the world"); British took heavy casualties (250) retreating from Concord.
- **Bunker Hill (June 17, 1775):** Fought at Breed's Hill (misnamed). British technically won the hill but suffered massive casualties — a moral victory for the colonists.

***OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO:** At Bunker Hill, the British suffered roughly 1,054 casualties (of about 2,200 engaged) compared to around 450 American casualties — a British "victory" so costly that General William Howe later called it a battle he never wanted to fight again this way, and it convinced British commanders that taking the war seriously would be far more expensive than expected. — American Battlefield Trust, "Battle of Bunker Hill," accessed 2026.*

Second Continental Congress (May 1775)

- Divided between those (mostly New England) wanting independence and those (mostly middle colonies) hoping to negotiate.
- Adopted the **Declaration of the Causes and Necessities for Taking Up Arms**; appointed **George Washington** commander-in-chief.
- Authorized Benedict Arnold's raid on Quebec; organized a small navy/marine corps.
- **Peace effort — Olive Branch Petition (July 1775):** pledged loyalty to the king, asked him to intercede with Parliament. King George rejected it and instead endorsed the **Prohibitory Act** (Aug. 1775), declaring the colonies in rebellion and banning trade with them.

The Declaration of Independence

- **June 7, 1776:** Richard Henry Lee introduces a resolution for independence.
- A five-person committee, including **Thomas Jefferson**, drafts a supporting statement.
- **July 2:** Congress adopts Lee's resolution — John Adams actually predicted July 2, not July 4, would be the date Americans celebrated.

- **July 4, 1776:** Congress adopts Jefferson's **Declaration of Independence** — lists grievances against George III and lays out founding principles ("all men are created equal," unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness").

For essay writing — contextualize the Declaration, don't just quote it. The "self-evident truths" language borrows directly from John Locke's natural-rights philosophy (see Topic 3.4): government exists to protect natural rights, and when it fails to do so, the people may alter or abolish it. A strong essay response connects the Declaration's *ideas* back to the Enlightenment social contract, not just its famous phrases.

The Competing Sides

Of ~2.6 million colonists: ~40% **Patriots**, ~25% **Loyalists (Tories)**, the rest neutral.

British strengths: 3x the population, wealthy economy, powerful navy, experienced army.

Patriots: - Concentrated in New England and Virginia; mostly short-term local militia. - Washington never had more than 20,000 regulars at once; army was chronically underfed/underpaid, but resilient. - **African Americans:** Washington initially rejected Black soldiers; reversed course once the British offered freedom to enslaved people who joined them (see Lord Dunmore's Proclamation, Virginia, Nov. 1775). ~5,000 African Americans fought as Patriots (e.g., Peter Salem).

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: The clearest example of Black Patriot service is the **1st Rhode Island Regiment**, formed in 1778 when Rhode Island — desperate to fill its ranks — began enlisting enslaved men in exchange for freedom. It grew to roughly 225 soldiers, about 140 of them Black, "by far the largest percentage of Blacks in an integrated military unit" in the war. The regiment helped repel three British charges at the Battle of Rhode Island (Aug. 1778) and later fought at the Siege of Yorktown. This is a strong, specific example to cite on an essay about the unevenness of revolutionary ideals (compare with Topic 3.6). — *BlackPast.org* and *World History Encyclopedia*, "1st Rhode Island Regiment," accessed 2026.

Loyalists (Tories): - Fought alongside the British, supplying arms/food and raiding Patriot farms. - Strongest in port cities (except Boston) and possibly a majority in NY, NJ, and Georgia. - Tended to be wealthier/more conservative; included most government officials and Anglican clergy. - Divided families: Benjamin Franklin (Patriot) vs. his son William (Loyalist governor of NJ).

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: Historians' estimates of Loyalist numbers vary noticeably depending on definition and source — a good example of a "how do we even know this?" point for an essay. Historian **Maya Jasanoff** (*Liberty's Exiles*, 2011) estimates the broader Loyalist population at roughly 20% of the colonial population (around half a million people), while about 60,000 Loyalists actually fled at the war's end (not "~80,000" as some older estimates state), taking about 15,000 enslaved people with them — a total exodus of roughly 75,000 people, or about 1 in 40 Americans. — *Maya Jasanoff, Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (2011), via *Washington Post* review and *Smithsonian* catalog record, accessed 2026.

American Indians: Tried to stay neutral at first, but colonist attacks and British promises to limit colonial settlement pushed many toward the British.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: The war split the **Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy** for the first time in its centuries-long history: the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga (persuaded partly by Mohawk leader **Joseph Brant**) sided with the British, while the **Oneida and Tuscarora** — influenced by missionary Samuel Kirkland — sided with the Americans. Nations that had coexisted peacefully fought each other on Revolutionary battlefields. After the war, the British-allied nations were largely pushed onto reservations in Canada, while many Oneida were later forced onto a reservation near Green Bay, Wisconsin — despite having fought for American independence. This is a powerful comparison point: unlike Loyalists, Native allies of the winning side still lost their land. — *National Park Service, "The Six Nations Confederacy During the American Revolution,"* and *Museum of the American Revolution, "The Divided Ground,"* accessed 2026.

Initial American Losses (1775–1777)

- Washington's army nearly destroyed in the **Battle of New York** (1776).
- British occupy New York and Philadelphia by end of 1777.
- **Valley Forge (winter 1777–78):** brutal winter camp after losing Philadelphia.
- Trade collapsed 95% (1775–1777); **continentals** (paper money) became worthless; rampant inflation.

Alliance with France — the Turning Point

- **Battle of Saratoga (October 1777, upstate NY):** American generals Horatio Gates and Benedict Arnold force the surrender of British General John Burgoyne's army.
- **Diplomatic result:** Convinces France's King Louis XVI to formally ally with the Americans (1778) — France had secretly aided the Americans with money/supplies since 1775. Spain and Holland join against Britain a year later.
- This widened the war, forcing Britain to divert resources away from America — decisive to the outcome.

Causation chain for an essay: Saratoga (American battlefield victory) → proof to France that the Americans could actually win → formal Franco-American alliance (1778) → French money, arms, and — critically — the French navy enter the war → Britain must now defend the Caribbean, India, and the English Channel, not just America → resources stretched too thin to reinforce Cornwallis in 1781 → French fleet blocks the Chesapeake → Yorktown surrender. Saratoga is the *hinge*, not the ending — a strong thesis treats it as a cause of French intervention rather than a self-contained "turning point."

Victory

- Patriots led by **George Rogers Clark** capture British forts in the Illinois/Ohio country (1778–79).
- 1780: Britain shifts to a "southern strategy" (Virginia and the Carolinas, where Loyalists were strong).
- **Yorktown (1781):** Last major battle; French naval/military support helps Washington force the surrender of General **Cornwallis**.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: Yorktown was won at sea before it was won on land. On September 5, 1781, a French fleet of 24 ships of the line under **Admiral François Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse**, defeated a smaller British fleet under Admiral Thomas Graves at the **Battle of the Chesapeake**. This blocked the Chesapeake Bay, cutting off any British naval rescue or resupply of Cornwallis's army — a British naval historian later called it "the decisive battle of the war." Without this French naval victory, Washington's siege of Yorktown would likely have failed, since the British navy could otherwise have evacuated Cornwallis's army by sea, as it had done successfully elsewhere. — Britannica, "Battle of the Chesapeake," and Mount Vernon Digital Encyclopedia, accessed 2026.

- War becomes unpopular in Britain; Tory ministers (including Lord North) resign, replaced by Whigs wanting peace.
- **Treaty of Paris (1783):** 1. Britain recognizes U.S. independence 2. Mississippi River = western boundary 3. Americans get fishing rights off Canada 4. Americans must pay pre-war debts to British merchants and honor Loyalist property claims

Why the Weaker Side Won — Building a Causation Argument

If asked to explain American victory on an essay, don't just list battles — organize around *categories* of cause:

1. **Geography and logistics:** Britain fought a war 3,000 miles from home, resupplying across the Atlantic, against an enemy that only had to survive on its own ground, not conquer anything.
2. **The nature of the war itself:** Britain needed to *destroy* the Continental Army and pacify a hostile population spread across a huge territory; the Americans only needed to keep an army in the field and outlast British political will.
3. **Foreign intervention:** France (after Saratoga), then Spain and the Dutch Republic, turned a colonial rebellion into a global war Britain couldn't afford to fully commit to in America.
4. **British political will collapsed** before American resistance did — after Yorktown, a war-weary Parliament, not a battlefield defeat alone, ended the war.
5. **Leadership and cohesion:** Washington's ability to keep an underpaid, undersupplied army together for eight years (a *survival* strategy, not a conquering one) mattered as much as any single battlefield tactic.

Key Terms and Actors

Term/Actor	Definition	Why it's tested / often confused
First Continental Congress	1774 Philadelphia meeting responding to the Intolerable Acts	Often confused with the Second Continental Congress — the First still hoped for reconciliation, not independence

Term/Actor	Definition	Why it's tested / often confused
Suffolk Resolves	Massachusetts statement calling for resistance to the Intolerable Acts	Endorsed, not authored, by the First Continental Congress
Olive Branch Petition	Final American peace overture to George III, July 1775	Students often assume independence was decided by 1775 — it wasn't; this was a genuine, if failed, last attempt at reconciliation
Declaration of Independence	July 4, 1776 statement of separation and natural-rights philosophy	The vote to <i>declare</i> independence was July 2; July 4 is when the <i>text</i> was approved — a real distinction essay graders notice
Battle of Saratoga	Oct. 1777 American victory forcing British surrender	Its significance is diplomatic (bringing in France), not just military — a common surface-level answer misses this
1st Rhode Island Regiment	Integrated Black regiment formed 1778	Complicates the simple claim that Black Americans were uniformly excluded from the Patriot war effort
Battle of the Chesapeake	Sept. 1781 French naval victory blocking British reinforcement of Cornwallis	Frequently omitted entirely, even though it made the Siege of Yorktown possible
Treaty of Paris (1783)	Peace treaty ending the war	Confused with the 1763 Treaty of Paris (ending the Seven Years' War, Topic 3.2) — always specify the year

Recommended Videos

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO (this whole section): - **Heimler's History**, "The AMERICAN REVOLUTION [APUSH Review Unit 3 Topic 5 (3.5)]" — a direct, topic-matched review video with a companion note-guide, confirmed to exist and cover this exact AP topic. Search "Heimler's History APUSH 3.5" on YouTube. - **Heimler's History**, "APUSH Unit 3 REVIEW [Period 3: 1754–1800]—Everything You NEED to Know!" — useful for seeing how 3.5 connects to the rest of Unit 3. - Source for both: YouTube channel @heimlershistory, confirmed via search, accessed 2026.

LEQ/DBQ-Style Practice Prompts

- Causation:** "Evaluate the extent to which foreign intervention was the primary reason for American victory in the Revolutionary War." *A strong thesis takes a position* — e.g., argues foreign (especially French) intervention was decisive because it transformed a colonial rebellion into a global war Britain couldn't fully resource, while acknowledging domestic factors (Washington's army surviving, geography) as necessary but not sufficient on their own.
- Comparison:** "Compare the experiences of two of the following groups during the American Revolution: enslaved African Americans, Loyalists, and Native Americans." *A strong thesis* identifies a specific axis of comparison (e.g., both groups made calculated wartime alliances based on which side offered a path to freedom or land security — and both were, in different ways, betrayed by the outcome).
- Continuity and Change:** "Analyze the extent to which the American military effort changed between 1775 and 1781." *A strong thesis* might argue that the war shifted from a New England–centered defensive struggle (1775) to a broader, internationally-supported war of attrition (by 1781), while the underlying strategy — avoid decisive defeat, outlast British will — stayed constant throughout.

Quick Review Questions

- Why was the Battle of Saratoga more important diplomatically than militarily?
- What advantages did Britain have, and why did they still lose?
- How did the war create a split among African Americans, Loyalists, and Native Americans regarding which side to support?
- Why did the Iroquois Confederacy split during the war, and what happened to Native nations on both sides afterward?
- What role did the French navy specifically (not just the French alliance broadly) play in the final American victory at Yorktown?

One Thing to Remember

Saratoga didn't win the war by itself — it won the war by convincing France to join it. Every subsequent American advantage (money, arms, and especially the navy that trapped Cornwallis at Yorktown) flows from that one 1777 diplomatic consequence, which is why an essay that treats Saratoga as *only* a battlefield turning point is missing the actual mechanism of American victory.