8.4: The Treaty of Paris, 1783

For the British, the American Revolution was but one of several conflicts taxing the resources of the British military in 1783. Not only were the American colonists in revolt, aided by Britain’s long-standing enemy, France, but there were conflicts with the Spanish and Dutch and a separate issue with the French as well. Diplomatic negotiations known as the Peace of Paris saw the signing of several treaties that put these conflicts to rest, at least for the moment.

The Treaty of Paris, 1783, was the treaty that dealt specifically with the American Revolution. For the Americans, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay led the negotiations and signed the treaty for the United States. David Hartley, British MP signed as the representative of King George III. The treaty laid out the terms for peace between the United States and Great Britain in ten straightforward articles. The French had hoped to keep the Americans from signing a separate treaty with the British. Keeping the British occupied with a war against their own colonies was to the French advantage, as it tied up resources, both financial and military, that the British might use in a conflict with France. The American negotiators realized though that prolonging the war was not in the best interests of their fledgling nation: it drained them financially and of human life. With this in mind, the Americans made their separate peace.

**Article I**

In Article I, Britain promised to recognize sovereignty of the United States, listing each of the former colonies by name: New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. All British claims to the United States were relinquished.

**Article II**

The borders of the United States as recognized by Great Britain were established. The intention was particularly to define the borders between the United States and those North American colonies still loyal to Britain in
Canada. This treaty did not deal with the issue of Florida, which was settled between Great Britain and Spain in a separate treaty.

**Article III**

Article III covered fishing rights, particularly the rights to fish the Grand Banks off of Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In 1783, they were important to the economy of Canada and New England as well as Europe.

**Article IV**

Before the Revolution, colonial merchants and planters were heavily involved with British banking houses and merchants. This article guaranteed the rights of people in both countries to collect their debts. Although the right to collect debts was recognized, collecting international debts in 1783 was not always easy or even possible.

**Article V**

Article V was concerned with the rights of British subjects and Loyalists. With Article V, the United States promised that Congress would make an effort to encourage the various state legislatures to protect the property rights of British subjects and Loyalists who had their property seized during the war. It is worth noting that while this article promised that Congress would encourage the legislatures to respect the property rights of Loyalists, nowhere in the article does it actually guarantee that those property rights would be respected. In other words, Congress was bound by this treaty to bring the matter to the attention of the various legislatures, but the legislatures, in turn, were free to do as they pleased.

**Article VI**

This article continues with the issue of Loyalists who remained in the United States. With this article, the United States essentially promised to protect Loyalists from further harassment, either by having property seized or being charged with crimes. Further, any Loyalist who was imprisoned at the time of the ratification of the treaty would be immediately released.

**Article VII**

Article VII promised a tidy end to the war. The British were to remove their troops and property from the United States as soon as they could without any theft, including of slaves that belonged to the Americans. All prisoners on both sides were to be released, and any documents or records of importance to Americans that were in British hands were to be returned.

**Article VIII**

Article VIII promised that both Americans and British subjects would always be allowed to travel the full length of the Mississippi River, “…from its source to the ocean…” In 1783, the end of the Mississippi where it pours into the Gulf of Mexico was well-known. However, the actual source was not, to Americans and Europeans alike. Not until 1806 would it be known that there definitely was no Northwest Passage, and not until 1832 would the area of the headwaters of the Mississippi River be discovered and explored by non-Indians.


**Article IX**

Article IX promised that if any American territory fell into British hands, or British territory fell into American hands during the Revolution, the territory would be returned to its proper owner without any difficulties.

**Article X**

A ratification deadline of six months from the date of signing was specified with this article.

### 8.5.1: Before You Move On...

**Key Concepts**

Although the Treaty of Paris promised the best intentions of both sides, in the end, it was just a piece of paper. It signaled the end of the war and the beginning of a new period of peace between the United States and Great Britain, but the articles of the Treaty, particularly those that required the obedience of the states, were not always followed. In addition, the British were slow in some cases to actually move out of the areas they were to vacate and the emotions that led to the persecution of Loyalists during the war did not instantly subside. While the treaty addressed several issues, it failed to mention Indian tribes which had fought on both sides and so had a stake in the outcome of the war. Even the most important provision of the treaty, that Britain would recognize the sovereignty of the United States, would be imperfectly applied, leading to increasing abuse by the British of American shipping. The perhaps inevitable conflict less than thirty years later was known as the War of 1812.

**Test Yourself**

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

For all practical purposes, the Treaty of Paris ignored the American Indians.

a. True

b. False

**Answer**
a

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\)

Both the Americans and the British gave up claims to the Mississippi for the sake of peace.

a. True

b. False

**Answer**
b
Exercise \(\PageIndex{3}\))

Loyalists were protected by the treaty and well treated after it was signed.

a. True

b. False

Answer

b

Sidebar \(\PageIndex{1}\))

Just how “revolutionary” was the American Revolution? Certainly the English colonials won their independence, and the system of government they would eventually adopt would not be a monarchy; neither was it a full-fledged democracy, a reality later reflected in the Constitution of 1789.

Historians are generally divided into two camps in their interpretation of the American Revolution. Some historians argue that the Revolution was primarily a colonial rebellion whose aim was simply independence from Britain. According to these historians, colonial society was essentially a democratic society, and the Revolution sought to maintain the status quo. Other historians take a more radical view of the Revolution, seeing it as a violent social upheaval that was the result of a class conflict in which the lower classes of colonial society attempted to implement a greater degree of democracy and attain greater equality.

Historians who wrote in eras when nationalism was an important ideal or issue tend to view the Revolution as a radical event which helped to forge greater unity among the colonists and a greater degree of liberty. George Bancroft's *History of the United States*, written in the period between the Jacksonian era and the Civil war, is an example of a work which tended to emphasize the unity of the colonists in their quest for liberty against the tyrannical policies of the British.

The Imperial School of Historians

In the twentieth century, historians began to look more critically at nationalistic views, such as those of Bancroft. The so-called “imperial” school of historians, represented by the work of George Beer, Charles Andrews, and Lawrence Gipson, argued that the American Revolution should be understood within the context of the British Empire as a whole. Gipson's multi-volume *The British Empire before the American Revolution*, published between the 1930s and the 1960s, argued forcefully that British taxation of the colonies was justified, as the mother country had defended the colonies with soldiers and money during the French and Indian War (1754-1763). The imperial school of historians argued that conflicts over constitutional issues were at the heart of the Revolution; while the mother country sought greater control over her empire, the colonies were moving toward self-government. Essentially, the Revolution, for the imperialist historians, represented a conflict between two incompatible societies.
The Progressive School of Historians

On the other hand, the school of progressive historians, who wrote in an age dominated by concern about concentration of power in the hands of a few elite, argued that social and economic issues were the root cause of the Revolution. Carl Becker argued that the American Revolution was not one revolution but two: an external revolution against Britain caused by a conflict of economic interests, and an internal revolution of one class in American society against another to determine “who should rule at home” (The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776, 22). In The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement, J. Franklin Jameson spelled out in great detail the radical social and economic reforms achieved in the Revolution. Loyalist estates were confiscated and sold in smaller plots to farmers. Land ownership was more widespread than it was in England, there were no titles of nobility or any of the other trappings of monarchy, and religious freedom was guaranteed in most state constitutions and in the Constitution of 1789. Property qualifications for voting were lowered, slavery was abolished in some of the states, some slaves received their freedom in return for service in the war, and the Anglican Church was disestablished. The progressive historians, then, saw the Revolution as a radical turning point in American history, in which the dispossessed lower classes advanced their cause and attained greater rights and equality.

The Neoconservative School of Historians

Since World War II, however, the “neoconservative” historians have challenged the radical view of the Progressives. Historians such as Robert E. Brown have challenged the Progressive view that colonial America was undemocratic. Brown and others argue that very few colonists, for example, were disenfranchised as voters based on property qualifications; his study of Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts suggested that the vast majority of adult males in colonial America owned enough property to vote. Similarly, Daniel Boorstin argued in The Genius of American Politics that the American revolutionaries fought not to achieve a radical new social order, but only to defend the traditional order against British intrusions. According to this school of thought, the Revolution was an ideological movement concerned with preserving rights, as opposed to a radical movement that sought sweeping social, economic, and political changes. Sometimes referred to as the “consensus school” of historians, these critics downplayed class conflict within colonial society and instead depicted the “patriot” element of society as having essentially the same goals and aspirations, regardless of social class.

Ideology and the Revolution

Beginning in the 1960s, a new focus fell on the intellectual underpinnings of the American Revolution, taking the discussion of the event in a new direction. Beginning with Bernard Bailyn’s Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, historians stressed ideas as the cause of the Revolution, rather than social and economic factors. They asserted that the colonists, impacted by Whig politics in England and the earlier tradition of anti-authoritarian thought promulgated in the Glorious Revolution, truly came to believe their liberties were in danger.

New Left Historians

During the 1960s, another group of historians, referred to as the “New Left,” criticized earlier historians’ focus on colonial elites and began to assert that the revolution was influenced by the desires of the “lower sort” in colonial society. Referred to as “bottom up” history, the work of scholars such as Alfred E. Young and Edward Countryman has
redirected a great deal of research to non-elite groups such as militia members and artisans.

The Debate Continues

Few topics in American history have elicited such a wide range of interpretations from historians. The Revolution is still a very active area of research today. More recent works, such as Gordon Wood’s *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, have returned to older themes of colonial class dynamics, while incorporating New Left perspectives of examining changing attitudes and lifestyles among everyday Americans. Wood’s focus turns to the social changes wrought by the revolution, and in the end, as the title implies, asserts that the political changes brought on by the Revolution in creating a republic radically altered American society. The Revolution, according to Wood, shifted colonial society from a people tied to an old world culture of deference and tradition to a modern, liberal, and democratic people. Wood’s work immediately resulted in a new debate over the merits of this perspective. Undoubtedly, further examinations of this momentous event will continue to emerge in the years to come.