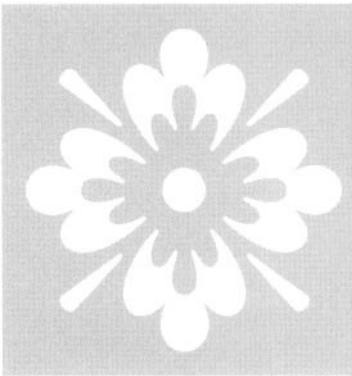


POPULAR SUPPORT



Did the British people support the government's policies toward the Thirteen Colonies?

Viewpoint: Yes. The Crown was simply carrying out the will of the British people.

Viewpoint: No. Britain was severely polarized over the ministry's coercive American policy, and persistent opposition forced the Crown to wage a limited war, which contributed to the American victory.

Popular opinion and its relationship to a government's ability to resolve international disputes and successfully wage war is especially important for a thorough understanding of the American Revolution (1775–1783) from the British perspective. Carefully analyzing this complex relationship may help to explain why Britain sought a military solution to the Anglo-American crisis and why it failed to crush the American independence movement. Although historians agree that there was no significant group in Parliament that supported the colonial position during the crisis, they are divided over the extent to which the British people either supported or opposed the home government's coercive policies in North America. Some scholars argue that the same political and constitutional issues that compelled the colonists to rebel against the mother country were also present in Great Britain, especially among the mass of Englishmen who were politically disfranchised, members of dissenting religious sects, and the aggressive industrial and commercial classes. These disgruntled people saw in America hopes for political and constitutional reform in their own country. This hope fueled widespread, vocal, and persistent opposition in England to the Crown's apparent arbitrary, unconstitutional, and coercive measures against America. These pro-American voices expressed their feelings in thousands of newspaper articles and pamphlets and in hundreds of addresses and petitions to the Crown and Parliament criticizing the corruption of the constitution (and British politics) as well as Prime Minister Frederick North's American policy. These dissidents, although a minority, gained strength as wartime taxes increased and as British military defeats mounted. The will to fight waned among the English people, resulting in a decline in military enlistment and fewer prowar candidates elected to Parliament. With the people so divided over its American policy, the ministry was forced to wage a limited war. Therefore, any explanation of why Britain failed to defeat America must include the polarization in England over the rebellion.

However, other historians maintain that Whitehall enjoyed popular support. They contend that a majority of British people viewed the independence movement as a serious threat to Britain's economic welfare since America served as both a source of raw materials for the mother country and as a market for its manufactured goods. Just as important, Britons feared that failure to reject the Americans' interpretation of the British constitution, by force if necessary, would only reopen old political divisions that could easily lead to a constitutional crisis at home. Once Britain's enemies (France and Spain) joined the American cause, support for the home government's policies became widespread; it intensified in 1779 and 1781 when American and

French warships attacked coastal towns in the British Isles. Even the traditionally oppressed groups in Great Britain—Irish Catholics and Scottish Highlanders—rallied behind the Crown in large numbers to prove their loyalty. This widespread public support for Whitehall’s American policy is reflected in thousands of people illuminating their windows with candles to demonstrate their patriotism, signing prowar petitions addressed to King George III, joining the Navy and Army, and willingly paying increased taxes to fund the war effort.

An analysis of British popular support is beneficial because it can help explain both the genesis and conclusion of the Anglo-American conflict. On one hand, widespread opposition to coercive measures against America would suggest that London officials either failed adequately to rally public support for their policies or unwisely and perhaps arrogantly decided to ignore public opinion. This sympathy in England for the American cause might also help explain why the ministry failed to wage a more aggressive and unlimited war against the Americans and why the British lost the conflict. It therefore emphasizes the danger of any government failing to consider public opinion toward its policies. On the other hand, if Whitehall enjoyed popular support for its American policies, then the British ministry was simply carrying out the people’s will. Therefore, British defeat in the American Revolution cannot be explained as a result of a lack of national desire.



Viewpoint:
Yes. The Crown was simply carrying out the will of the British people.

A majority of the British public viewed the American rebellion (1775–1783) as a dangerous development that would only aid Britain’s rival, France, in its imperial ambitions. They also feared that the American challenge to established authority might plunge Britain into a new round of religious wars like those it had experienced in the seventeenth century. For these reasons, they endured the high taxes, disruption of trade, and other sacrifices that went with a large and protracted war. Popular support for the war only intensified when France and other European countries joined the American side, threatening Britain with invasion. Britain’s Old Regime was profoundly undemocratic, but when King George III’s subjects saw its survival hanging in the balance, they concluded that winning the war and preserving the empire was in their self-interest.

In 1783 Lord Frederick North proclaimed to the House of Commons that the recently concluded war had enjoyed “almost unanimous” approval; indeed, it had been “the most popular of any that had been carried on for many years.” Lord Camden, North’s opponent, begged to differ, claiming that North’s government did not have even “half of the nation” on its side. English journalist and essayist William Cobbett recollected years later that the public was “nearly equally divided in their opinions, concerning that war.” To complete this confusing picture, the *Annual Register* remarked in 1776 that the British public received news of the American war with “unusual apathy.” These four accounts are from eyewitnesses; as such, they have an advantage that no historian today possesses. Still,

when eyewitnesses disagree so much, their testimony remains open to question. Should one dismiss Lord North’s claim because it was self-serving? Was the *Annual Register*—or Lord Camden—speaking for a small social circle but not a broad cross section of the public? How does one know which voices to believe?

To answer the question about popular support for a war that took place more than two hundred years ago, one must cope with scattered and incomplete evidence. Often poll results, or the victors in the following election, can reveal sentiment in a country. However, there were no opinion polls in eighteenth-century Britain, and so few people had the right to vote that elections are not a useful measuring tool either. Still, historians are persistent people, and the shortage of evidence has not prevented them from seeking answers.

Two kinds of people can be classified as “supporters”: those who cooperated with the war effort (for instance, who served in the armed forces or who sold provisions to the military) and loyal taxpayers who took no action to impede the war. The government needed supporters of both kinds in order to sustain the conflict. The government’s rationale for the war might have been relatively unimportant in the minds of these supporters; most people probably calculated which position would be to their personal advantage. For example, a young man might seek a commission as a naval officer because he wanted to serve under a famous commander, earn “prize money” from captured enemy vessels, and then use this wealth and glamour to secure a socially advantageous marriage. John Cartwright had exactly these ambitions but finally refused a commission as a naval officer because he sympathized with the cause of the Americans. Yet, for every Cartwright who said “no,” how many similar young men signed up?

Of course, the war could harm a merchant's livelihood as easily as it could make a young officer's career. Many commercial interests were bound up with the American market. A disruption of trade meant that the colonists might look elsewhere or learn to provide for themselves and that market would be lost, perhaps forever. Whole communities in Britain, in some cases, relied on American consumers to keep their workforce employed. Despite these hazards, Britain's business community—and many humble people whose pockets were not so deep—grudgingly accepted the risk of supporting hostilities in America precisely because their prosperity was linked to overseas possessions. The British Empire was more than spots marked on a map; it was a market for British goods. Nineteenth-century economists argued that free trade meant that the merchant with the best and cheapest products would prosper—with or without an empire—but the received wisdom in the eighteenth century was that an independent America would only be a loss for British business. The long rivalry with France meant that Britain's loss looked inevitably like France's gain. Whatever the Americans' talk of liberty, some British merchants argued, how long did the colonists really think they could maintain their independence when France was already introducing troops on their soil (supposedly to "help" them)?

Many observers in the mother country saw the American Rebels not as defenders of an ancient tradition of English liberty but instead as a throwback to the religious zealots, whose defiance of royal authority had plunged the British Isles into a bloody civil war in the previous century. The fact that the war started in New England, which had been settled by those same zealots, made this view seem especially plausible. The unwritten constitution of Great Britain was a complex balancing act composed of precedents and tacit understandings intended to protect the country from another civil war. The bold revolutionary rhetoric of the colonists threatened to upset this delicate balance. The constitution was supposed to protect against a government that did not respect the liberty of the individual, but it was also supposed to guard against the risk of anarchy when people asked for too much liberty. The Gordon Riots (1780) reminded Londoners of the tensions that simmered beneath the surface of eighteenth-century British society. Some historians have described the Gordon Riots as an uprising of the poor against the rich, but observers at the time interpreted it as a replay of the old seventeenth-century enmities between Catholics and extremist Scottish Protestants. Changing one part of the constitution to placate the Americans might jeopardize the whole 1688 settlement of the Glorious Revolution, reopening all of the old wounds. Not surprising, the clergy of the Church of England, which enjoyed a privileged position under the existing constitution, were among the most vigorous supporters of the war.

If the "winners" under the constitution (aristocratic landowners and Anglican clergy) looked forward to American defeat, one might expect the "losers" (Irish Catholics and Scottish Highlanders) to cheer the rebels on. Instead, members of these oppressed groups—whose language, culture, and religion had been treated as criminal and treasonous—actually rallied to the government's side in surprising numbers. Charles O'Connor, a prominent Irish Catholic, announced that he looked forward to the victory of "our army" in America, since he hoped that the colony of Maryland would be returned to Catholic control after the war as a way to weaken "Puritan" power in the New World. Scottish Highlanders, whose political and military power had been smashed following their 1745 uprising, sought to convince the government of their loyalty by volunteering for army and navy service. In return, Parliament relaxed the punitive laws imposed on the rebellious Highlanders. Why were these marginalized minorities willing to risk their lives in the service of a London-based government that treated their countries as conquered provinces of an empire? Part of the answer lies in the idea of empire itself. An Irish, Scottish, or Welsh indi-

vidual might feel like a second-class citizen in London, but that same individual could assume a “British” identity overseas, where the old ethnic and religious divisions mattered less than the daily struggle to rule natives, enrich the mother country, and foil the efforts of French or Spanish enemies. Empire meant opportunity, and keeping it was worth a fight.

Another motive for supporting the war, possibly the most important, was the need to protect Britain from foreign invasion. The American war was a European conflict from 1778 onward. With the French, Spanish, and Dutch lined up against them, the British were unmistakably the underdog; the population of France alone was twice that of the British Isles. Even opponents of the government’s American policy, such as Admiral Augustus Keppel, were eager to take on these adversaries. Early in the war, defeat would have meant the loss of America—which was galling enough—but the invasion threats of 1779 and 1781 showed that the homes, liberties, and lives of ordinary Britons were now at risk. Coastal communities along the whole length and breadth of the British Isles readied themselves for enemy attack. The raid of the American naval captain John Paul Jones on the Scottish coast in April 1778 served as another reminder that the homeland was endangered. In this atmosphere, winning the war, or at a minimum winning enough battles that Britain could undertake peace negotiations from a position of strength, took on tremendous urgency. Here, once again, one can identify a group of “supporters” whose feelings had little to do with a reasoned appraisal of the government’s case against the rebellious colonists.

There is a difference, of course, between offering plausible reasons why individuals might have supported the war and proving that a majority of the British public actually adopted that position. How can one move beyond anecdotes of individual supporters and successfully generalize about public opinion? One source of evidence is the illuminations that took place to commemorate military victories during the war. Contemporary newspaper accounts tell of whole towns whose citizens put candles in every window to demonstrate their patriotism. These displays involved hundreds of thousands of people, each making a personal decision to illuminate his or her home. However, illuminations were encouraged by local officials, and one cannot be certain about the role that peer pressure—not to mention intimidation—might have played in lighting up the streets.

Historians in search of a more precise measuring tool have turned to the many petitions addressed to George III on the subject of the war. A petition is a specific declaration of intent,

unlike a candle in a window. Furthermore, the occupations and backgrounds of thousands of petition signers can provide clues about the social composition of the pro- and antiwar camps. Although thousands of people signed prowar petitions, many more signed antiwar petitions. Yet, the historian’s task is to estimate the sentiments of a nation of millions, most of whom signed no petition at all. How representative are the petitions of that larger nation? One may be dealing with a small, vigorous minority opinion rather than a popular view.

In the end, the best measuring tool is the war itself. The British government fought a long, expensive, global war. Between the army and the navy, Britain fielded more than two hundred thousand men, not a small accomplishment, which could not have been achieved without the active or passive cooperation of countless individuals and communities. Lord North’s ministry did not survive military defeat, but the resilience of George III and the old, unreformed constitution—despite the best that domestic critics, American Rebels, and the combined forces of Britain’s three great commercial and military rivals could throw at them—is impressive. The confrontation with French leader Napoleon Bonaparte is often portrayed as George III’s darkest hour, but Napoleon’s arrogance allowed Britain to eventually rally most of Europe in a grand alliance against France—the opposite of Britain’s underdog position in the American war. The British constitution weathered the French republican challenge as it had the American one, and Parliament continued “taxation without representation” in the British Isles until the First Reform Bill (1832). The survival of Britain’s Old Regime in an age of revolution proves that it commanded real popular support, even if that support was mostly of a self-interested kind.

—ISAAC LAND, TEXAS A&M
UNIVERSITY—COMMERCE



Viewpoint:
No. Britain was severely polarized over the ministry’s coercive American policy, and persistent opposition forced the Crown to wage a limited war, which contributed to the American victory.

The complete breakdown of relations between Great Britain and its colonies in North America in 1775–1776 opened an era in which the British, both as a government and a people, were forced to contend with a mounting tide of

domestic and international problems. Collectively, those problems rendered the American War of Independence (1775–1783), for all its contemporary and later significance, only part of a larger framework of governmental and popular concerns. Given the nature of Anglo-French rivalry in the eighteenth century, the American challenge to British authority was bound to carry with it the threat of French intervention, made real in 1778 with formal French entry into the war on the side of the colonists. The Franco-American alliance, in conjunction with Spanish and Dutch declarations of war against Great Britain in 1779 and 1780, respectively, transformed an intra-Empire conflict, hitherto confined to mainland North America, into a global war with additional theaters of operation in the Caribbean, India, coastal Africa, and Europe. In particular, this expansion of conflict entailed serious dangers for the security of the British Isles in light of growing restlessness in Ireland and the possibility of a direct French invasion.

Compounding matters further was a striking lack of domestic consensus on something much more fundamental than the policies that the government adopted in coping with these challenges. Widespread and loud opposition to government actions was underpinned by strong denials of the legitimacy of the government itself. Just as British policy in North America after 1763 had evolved into a confrontation defined in terms of high political and constitutional principles, in Britain the quarrel with the colonists revealed deep rifts in domestic opinion about such contentious issues as the nature of authority and liberty, the relationship of the people to the state, and the character and function of empire. Only when this broader context of domestic and international problems is kept in mind is it possible to understand the magnitude of the obstacles that the government faced in fighting the American war and, accordingly, to appreciate fully the strength and impact of the domestic opposition to the government in its attempts to do so.

Domestic support for Lord Frederick North's government was no doubt quite formidable, starting at the top of the political order with the tenacious, not to say obsessive, backing of the King, especially once the colonists made clear their determination to fight for independence. This struggle ensured that the full panoply of Crown patronage, from that utilized to influence both houses of Parliament to that of local consequence in the boroughs and shires of Britain, was turned over to North and his colleagues for use as they thought best. In addition to the considerable advantages this influence gave them in securing favorable votes in Parliament for their policies, the traditions of the

so-called independent country gentlemen in the House of Commons—that is to say, those not in receipt of government patronage—dictated that they support the King's government so long as its policies did not trespass unduly on their consciences or interests. In the case of government coercion of rebellious American colonists, there was little likelihood of such transgressions taking place, since the exalted ranks from which the independent country gentlemen sprang—which included the titled nobility, the landed gentry, and the Anglican clergy—overwhelmingly favored disciplining and, once war broke out, defeating the colonists.

The upper ranks were joined in these convictions by important groups farther down the social scale, including virtually the entire legal profession, most town corporations of leading citizens, and even large elements of the merchant class, particularly those engaged in overseas commerce. The existence of this latter group among the supporters of government coercion in America is all the more surprising given the extent to which British mercantile interests had sought to placate American recalcitrance in earlier crises, such as that occasioned by introduction of the Stamp Act (1765). The American decision for independence in 1776, however, was another matter. Such a course seemed to many merchants to endanger their capital and trade, which to them promised to be more secure within the framework of a viable and protective empire.

With backing of this sort, the North government enjoyed throughout much of the American crisis an apparently unassailable position in Parliament and in key institutions of local government in many parts of the kingdom. Yet, this backing by no means exhausted the resources at the disposal of the government and its many powerful supporters. Much lower down the social scale, among the “rabble” of illiterate, itinerant urban poor, there developed during the eighteenth century a rambunctious, sometimes violent and ugly, species of patriotism and loyalty to the Crown and a crude form of Protestantism, especially in times of war against Catholic France. Appeals for support from this boisterous element could be quite problematic for those in authority, as was amply demonstrated in the Gordon Riots (1780), but there is no question that parts of the “mob” in London and elsewhere could be counted on to hold views actively hostile to the American “rebels” and their cause. Such hostility was among the dangers, sometimes quite physical in nature, that opponents of the government could encounter in making known their opinions on American policy. The risks of opposition were further increased by the government's resorting to the force of law to discourage, if not silence, dissent, including the use of prosecutions



GAZETTES OF BLOOD

In a letter dated 14 June 1775 to King George III, the Lord Mayor and the Aldermen of London addressed the opening of hostilities with the American colonists:

As we would not suffer any man, or body of men, to establish arbitrary power over us, we cannot acquiesce in any attempt to force it upon any part of our fellow-subjects; we are persuaded that by the sacred, unalterable rights of human nature, as well as by every principle of the constitution, the Americans ought to enjoy peace, liberty and safety; that whatever power invades these rights ought to be resisted; we hold such resistance, in vindication of their constitutional rights, to be their indispensable duty to God, from whom those rights are derived to themselves, who cannot be safe and happy without them; to their posterity, who have a right to claim this inheritance at their hands unviolated and unimpaired.

We have already remonstrated to your Majesty that these measures were big with all the consequences which could alarm a free and commercial people; a deep and perhaps fatal wound to commerce; the ruin of manufactures; the diminution of the revenue, and consequent increase of taxes; the alienation of the colonies, and the blood of your Majesty's subjects.

Unhappily, Sire, the worst of these apprehensions is now realized in all its horror: We have seen with equal dread and concern a civil war commenced in America by

your Majesty's Commander in Chief: Will your Majesty be pleased to consider what must be the situation of your people here, who have nothing now to expect from America but Gazettes of blood and mutual lists of their slaughtered fellow-subjects.

Every moment's prosecution of this fatal war may loosen irreparably the bonds of that connection on which the glory and safety of the British Empire depend.

If anything could add to the alarm of these events, it is your Majesty's having declared your confidence in the wisdom of men a majority of whom are notoriously bribed to betray their constituents and their country. It is the misfortune of your Majesty, it is the misfortune and grief of your people, to have a Grand Council and a representative under an undue and dangerous influence; an influence, which though procured by your Ministers, is dangerous to your Majesty, by deceiving you, and to your people, by betraying them.

In such a situation, your petitioners are bound to declare to your Majesty, that they cannot and will not sit unconcerned; that they will exert themselves, at every hazard, to bring those who have advised these ruinous measures to the justice of this country, and of the much-injured Colonies.

Source: John Almon, ed., The Remembrancer; or Impartial Repository of Public Events, 17 volumes (London: Almon, 1775–1780), I: 76–77.

for seditious libel and the suspension of habeas corpus in 1777.

These latter two government instruments of suppression were to have considerable chilling effects on opposition later in the century at the time of the French Revolution (1789–1799). Such effects most decidedly were not seen in the 1770s, however, in large measure because the government failed egregiously, unlike in the later French case, to convince broad sections of national opinion that the Americans' position was something alien and a threat to English liberties and to good and just government. On the contrary, the efforts of successive British ministries to coerce the Americans into obedience, culminating in passage of the Intolerable Acts (1774) following the Boston Tea Party (1773), flew smack in the face of a deeply entrenched

and resilient tradition of English libertarianism, derived from many sources, both historical and contemporary. Especially worrisome for those steeped in this tradition was the apparent link between attacks on liberty in America, most notably seen in government attempts to tax the colonists without reference to consent of their colonial assemblies, and government efforts at home to undermine the constitutional safeguards necessary for freedom and to deny to the people rights that they ought to have. From this perspective, subjects of the British Crown constituted a single political community, regardless of which side of the Atlantic they lived on, sharing in common the "rights of free-born Englishmen," now threatened by a corrupt, oligarchic coterie bent on enhancing the power of the state in furtherance of their narrow, selfish interests.

This congruence of crisis in America and opposition to government in Britain rigorously tested the capacity of the state to control its colonial subjects overseas and, at the same time, to defend the status quo against dissidents at home. In the same years that British governments were lurching from one misguided policy to another in American affairs and then, under North, blundering into war, radical agitation in Britain was becoming a veritable staple of domestic politics. Beginning with the Wilkite movement in the 1760s and 1770s, and climaxing with the county and metropolitan association campaigns for parliamentary reform from 1779 to 1785, the governments of the day were subjected to unremitting domestic criticism. Moreover, the criticism concerned issues of great moment—touching on such matters as freedom from arbitrary arrest, freedom of the press, the relative power of the electorate and the state, and rights of political participation—which were not dissimilar to those being raised simultaneously in America.

Particularly striking about the British agitation was its extraparliamentary, popular character, especially marked in the case of the Wilkite movement, which transformed organized government opposition into an historically significant extension of popular participation in national politics. This movement, too, was in keeping with the popular character of American radicalism, the goal of extending and protecting popular rights, thereby becoming a central theme in the coalescence of antigovernment agitations on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, there was an impressive consistency of outlook and a continuity of leadership between pro-Wilkes, antigovernment supporters in the 1760s, and those who were pro-American in the 1770s in London and other large towns. Likewise, the parliamentary reform campaigns of 1779 and after were directly tied to and animated by opposition to government policy in America and were concerned with extending the parliamentary franchise so as to purify the legislature of corruption (by elimination of Crown patronage), to make it more responsive to an enlarged electorate, and to bring the American war to an end.

The popular nature of the extraparliamentary opposition to the government and its war in America derived principally from the appeal of the movement to social groups outside the institutional framework of political power in eighteenth-century Britain. Those excluded from town corporations, outside the established church, and distrustful of the law were most often numbered among those in favor of conciliatory policies in America and reform of church and state at home. This group included members of the Protestant dissenting denominations—such as

Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Quakers, and Baptists—whose clergy played vital roles in mobilizing and organizing support for the American colonists both before and after the outbreak of hostilities. Equally important in opposition, and certainly more so in terms of numbers, were artisans or skilled craftsmen, who as a group were often literate, Dissenters in religion, and politically active on a wide array of issues. The artisans were leavened by many shopkeepers and retailers of various sorts, professionals of the middling ranks, more humble merchants, small manufacturers, and the publicists of a robust, unruly press. In other words, they were the bedrock of urban society. Gathered together in a rich political matrix of debating societies, reform clubs, taverns, and coffeehouses, these urban elements, in London and the larger provincial towns, represented a persistent, intractable challenge to the authorities in charge of local as well as national government.

Popular opposition was not confined solely to outsiders and the excluded. The emergence of the Parliamentary reform movement at the height of the American war in 1779 added greatly to the force of government opposition outside Parliament. It did so in part by broadening the social base of organized hostility to the government's American policy. Newly established county associations drew landed gentry of progressive views and liberal Anglican clergy, along with many small farmers and sturdy rural tradesmen, into what by then was becoming a national network of antiwar reformist organizations, with ties to the Whig opposition to North's government inside Parliament.

Merely to describe the popular opposition in such terms is to suggest that Britain at the time of the American Revolution was a society deeply divided on the question of how to respond to the colonial crisis. Earlier confrontations in the colonies, such as the uproar over introduction of the Stamp Act, had shown the capacity of colonial controversies to arouse strong support in British domestic opinion for the American position. This support was no less so even when relations had deteriorated to the point of outright violence. During the critical period of 1775–1776, when the colonists were moving rapidly toward an irreparable break with the mother country, the Crown was made aware of acutely divided opinion in Britain on the American situation. That opinion was expressed in loyal addresses to the throne supporting coercion and suppression in America and in countervailing petitions urging conciliation and concessions to the colonists. Addresses and petitions from twelve English counties and forty-seven boroughs and towns, with a total of forty-five thousand signatures, have survived from this period.

A recent study of their contents has found that while the loyal addresses were more plentiful, the majority of signatories of the combined addresses and petitions opposed coercion and favored conciliation. The large size of this latter group, made up of those willing to put their names to documents protesting coercive government policy in America, is all the more striking when the risks of signing the petitions are considered. Most of the petitions were signed after the King, following news of the clashes at Lexington and Concord (19 April 1775), had officially declared the colonists to be in a state of rebellion. Supporters of the government were thereby in a position to insist, as they did with energy and sometimes aggressive action, that opponents of government policy were essentially in treasonous alliance with open enemies of the Crown.

The picture, then, is one of rancor and conflict in British opinion on the American question, which is confirmed by the many detailed local studies of towns and counties throughout Britain that have uncovered differences of opinion sufficient to split entire communities and even families. If this division was the case at the commencement of hostilities, as the addresses and petitions seem to show, the subsequent years of warfare only deepened and expanded popular opposition. The intervention of France in the conflict in 1778, following the disastrous British surrender at Saratoga in the previous year, marked the point at which popular sentiment favoring the American war began seriously to erode and the opposition grew more formidable. In some ways French entry bolstered prowar opinion, which had become somewhat demoralized after Saratoga, since the advent of the historic national enemy allowed government supporters to make stepped-up claims on patriotism now that Britain was to be directed against an unambiguously foreign and hostile power. Yet, the dramatic expansion of the conflict also raised highly unsettling questions about the advisability of the American war and the competence of the government in directing it, the more so as Britain, following the Spanish and Dutch interventions, found itself at war with virtually all of Europe by 1780.

In these circumstances those people of more moderate and independent opinion, who in normal times might have been expected to support the King's government regardless of its makeup, became increasingly uneasy about the country's position in international affairs and the health of its political institutions. Those of this disposition might not have had sympathy for either American aspirations or the radical view that the government was bent on the imposition of tyranny in America and Britain. Yet, the

government's manifest failure to achieve timely victory in North America and to forestall dangerous outside interference seemed to some, on pragmatic grounds alone, to call for a change in policy, even if it required a reform of the state. The vehicles for achieving this reform were the metropolitan and county associations, which emerged in 1779 to campaign for reduction of the Crown's power and for greater accountability of the legislature to national sentiment. Pursuit of such objectives, having had distinguished precedents in English history, could be undertaken without obvious abandonment of patriotic credentials. As such, the associations served as a means of uniting, in common opposition to the North government, the moderate opinion of pragmatism with the more advanced and aggressive views of the ideologically motivated.

The power of British failures in America to drive lapsed sympathizers of coercion into the arms of the Parliamentary reform movement highlights once again the difficulties that the government encountered in attempting to isolate the American crisis from troublesome domestic issues. Although prowar sentiment remained strong and perhaps even predominant in and out of Parliament until the defeat at York Town (19 October 1781), opposition to the war was, from the start, doggedly persistent, highly motivated, and increasingly organized. This consistent opposition gave antiwar sentiment disproportionate weight in popular opinion and narrowed considerably the political options available to the government in fighting the war. By 1779–1780 the North ministry had come to fear the imminence of a tax revolt and was in fact confronted with a sharp increase in ad hoc resistance to rising wartime taxation in several parts of the kingdom. By no means serious enough to compromise government finances, the growing discontent with high taxes was underlined by the ministry's poor showing in the Parliamentary elections of 1780. In the larger, more "open" and popular constituencies, certainly, the election was marked by decisive defeats for progovernment candidates. As a result, the ministry was thenceforth reduced to dependency on a much reduced and shrinking majority in the House of Commons. Indeed, the temper of the time was such that Lord North and his associates, the embodiments of the closed, oligarchic character of the eighteenth-century political system, were moved to declare their actions in America to be in furtherance of "the war of the people." This obvious effort to hijack populist rhetoric for patriotic and loyalist purposes is just one more indication of the heightened significance of popular opinion in government thinking as they sought to fend off their vociferous critics.

Sometimes historians claim that Britain's defeat in the American War of Independence was, more than anything else, the result of military and logistical shortcomings. In a narrow, technical sense this situation was no doubt the case. The challenge of conducting large-scale operations so far afield and in such an inhospitable environment taxed severely the resources and expertise of even Britain's "fiscal-military state." Saratoga and York Town, especially, were major military defeats and, in different ways, turning points in the capacity and willingness of the British to continue the fight. Yet, little more than ten years later, Britain embarked on an entire generation of successful warfare against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, a titanic conflict that entailed operations of far greater extent, expense, and complexity than anything seen in the American war. To be sure, Britain's ongoing economic and social developments in the intervening period help to explain its greater effectiveness in the later war. Armies and navies, however, even in the eighteenth century, depended for success on more than good leaders and abundant supplies, particularly in conflicts of prolonged duration. Solid political support at home, both Parliamentary and popular, was essential for even an oligarchic government in directing extensive wars in which there were bound to be periodic setbacks. In the war against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, a far more dangerous enemy than the France of 1778, such domestic support for government actions was much more in evidence and was more long-lived than it had been in the earlier civil war against brethren across the Atlantic. The political costs of fighting a war overseas without an adequate measure of domestic consensus at home, costs that were becoming ever more apparent by 1779–1780, ultimately contributed, after the final debacle at York Town, to Britain's political exhaustion and

loss of will, the true causes of the defeat of this European power in its confrontation with rebellious colonists on the fringe of its Empire.

—PETER DUNKLEY,
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

References

- James E. Bradley, "The British Public and the American Revolution: Ideology, Interest, and Opinion," in *Britain and the American Revolution*, edited by H. T. Dickinson (London & New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 124–154.
- John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Knopf, 1989).
- Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
- Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- Dickinson, "Britain's Imperial Sovereignty: The Ideological Case against the American Colonists," in *Britain and the American Revolution*, edited by Dickinson (London & New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 64–96.
- Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
- Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).