Who Won the American Revolution?: Crash Course US History #7

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green; this is Crash Course U.S. History. There are two kinds of revolutions: those where things DO change and those where things don't change. Like, not to get all Crash Course Mathematics on you or anything, but a Revolution is a 360 degree turn, which leaves you back where you started.

That's what happened with the French Revolution, basically they just exchanged a Bourbon for a Bonaparte. What? I don't have to say it all French-y. This is American history. And shut up French people about how if it weren't for your support in the American Revolution, this would be the History of Southern Canada.

But other revolutions, like the Industrial Revolution, actually change things. So, which was the American Revolution? Well, little of column A, little of Column B.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Yeah, we went from a bunch of rich white guys running the show all the way to a bunch of rich white guys running the show.

You're not wrong, Me from the Past. But the 1700s were a pretty good century for rich white guys everywhere: I mean, they were running the show in Holland and Portugal and Spain, but only the United States became the country that invented baseball, the Model T, and competitive eating. So you're right, Me from the Past, but even if the US didn't live up to its rhetoric, that rhetoric was still powerful. And in the end whether you care more about ideas or policy defines whether you think the American Revolution really was Revolutionary.

Alright, let's start with the War for Independence. If you've been watching Crash Course, you'll know that we're not big on gratuitous war details. But we're obligated to tell you something about it.

The main strategy of the British in the Revolutionary war was to capture all the cities and force the colonists to surrender. And the first part of that strategy pretty much worked. They captured Boston and New York and Charleston, but all the colonists had to do was NOT QUIT. I mean, they had home-field advantage, knowledge of the terrain, easier supply lines, and Mr. Creepy Eyes down here. So while the British took the cities, the Americans, or Continentals, held onto the countryside.

The most famous battle of the war was probably the battle of Trenton, where Washington was like, "I'm gonna cross the Delaware on Christmas morning." - He had a funny voice. Everybody knows he had a funny voice. It's famous. That's a made up fact! Don't put it on your AP test. "What do I know about Washington? Well, I know he had a funny voice." - Washington surprised a bunch of Hessians, which was a pretty impressive victory especially since he had just come off of a string of defeats. But he wasn't able to turn it into an all out rout, and ended up having to spend a miserable winter at Valley Forge. But remember, generals always get to eat.

But the most important battle, at least in the North, was not Trenton, but Saratoga. This was a major defeat for the British, and while it's often put forth as an example of the superiority of the Continental fighting man, the British mostly lost because of terrible generalling.

The French would eventually bankrupt themselves helping us, which would lead to their own Revolution. As thanks, we named our most important food after them.

In the South the country-city trend continued with the British taking Charleston but then continuing to lose smaller scale battles and be harassed by guerrilla style tactics. The key battle of the war in the south - because it was the one where the British surrendered - was at Yorktown in 1781. Lord Cornwallis made the brilliant tactical decision to station his troops on a peninsula, surrounded on three sides by water filled with French ships, and the British lost the war.

So what did this all mean for actual people? Well, Americans like to think that we all pitched in together and got rid of British tyranny, and lived happily ever after. Also that the Continental army was the bravest, most loyal, and most effective fighting force in human history thanks to the leadership of George Washington. LIBERTAGE! But actually, well, yeah. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Morale among continental soldiers was often pretty low. Rations were poor and soldiers went unpaid. As Joseph Plumb Martin, a soldier from Connecticut, wrote, they felt they were "starving in detail for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us." And many other colonists didn't fight for independence; they fought with the British.

Others were pacifists, like the Quakers, who often had their property confiscated when they refused to fight, and in colonial America, of course, losing property also meant losing rights.

And for slaves, the so-called fight for freedom was very different than it was for Continental soldiers, because loyalty to Britain in the war could mean freedom. In 1775, British governor Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation that granted freedom to any slave who deserted his master and fought for the British. Something like 5,000 slaves took him up on the offer.

And in addition, many slaves saw the revolution as chance to escape. Boston King left a cruel master and later wrote, "I determined to go to Charles-Town and throw myself into the hands of the English. They received me readily, and I began to feel the happiness of liberty, of which I knew nothing before," 100,000 slaves are estimated to have fled to the British.

Now, many slaves were returned to their masters, but more than 15,000 left the U.S. when the British did. And it's worth remembering that the British empire abolished slavery in all of its territory by 1843 and without a civil war. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, Native Americans were also profoundly affected by the Revolutionary War. Generally, they wanted to stay out of it, and the Colonists mostly wanted them to remain neutral, too. Like, the Continental Congress was eager to remind the Iroquois of their history of neutrality, writing: "This is a family quarrel between us and Old England. You Indians are not concerned in it. We don't wish you to take up the hatchet against the king's troops. We desire you to remain at home, and not join on either side, but keep the hatchet buried deep."

Right, well, many of the Iroquois fought for the British, anyway. The Oneidas joined the Patriots, fighting against the Iroquois. Sometimes there were divisions within tribes themselves. Like, with the Cherokees; younger chiefs tended to side with the British, older ones with the Americans. And it should be mentioned that, unsurprisingly, American troops were particularly brutal to American Indians who fought for the British, burning their villages and enslaving prisoners, contrary to the accepted rules of war.

And, if the American revolution was really about, as Thomas Jefferson would have it, the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then the Indians were definitely the losers because they didn't get any of those rights. So, we know slaves and Indians didn't get much out of the Revolutionary War.

How did it go for women? Not great. Some colonial women fought in the war: Deborah Sampson dressed up as a man and fought at

several battles, once even pulling a bullet out of her own leg. But women didn't get much out of the Revolution. They were basically still considered wards of their husbands. Or, if they were unmarried, saleable assets of their fathers.

However, the idea of Republican Motherhood became really important. It held that for the republic to survive, it was necessary to have a well-educated citizenry. And since women were the primary educators, they themselves needed to be educated so they could, to quote Founding Father Benjamin Rush, "instruct their sons in the principles of liberty and government." But not vote or own property.

So the war didn't end slavery, it didn't much change the roles of women. And it didn't displace the elite, land-owning, pasty white guy leadership of America. So what was revolutionary? Well, the ideas. A lot of which are summed up in a single sentence of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

So, when the colonies became states, they all created constitutions, which opened voting to more people. While most states still had property qualifications for voting, the bar was lowered, so there were far more voters than there had been. Although they were mostly white and male, but still.

Another aspect of the American revolution that was pretty revolutionary was the beginning of true religious freedom. Like, with independence, the Church of England ceased to be the Church of America. And some founders, like Jefferson, were Deists, believing that God had created the world, but then stepped away to, like, create other universes or try to build a boulder too big for him to lift. Jefferson called for a "wall of separation" between Church and State that's best embodied in the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia, which Jefferson was so proud of that he had it mentioned on his tombstone.

And the American revolution profoundly changed the economy, too. Like, all these new ideas of liberty led to a decline in apprenticeship and indentured servitude. And, immediately after the war, you began to see the split between the North, with its reliance on paid labor, and the South, with its reliance on slavery. Slavery was actually on the decline in the South until Eli Whitney went and invented the cotton gin in 1793, which A. made it possible to turn a profit growing inferior American cotton, and B. reinvigorated slavery. Yay, innovation. Oh, no. It's time for the Mystery Document!

The rules are simple. Mystery Document. Get it wrong: shock pen. Get it right: WOOO.

"An equality of property…constantly operating to destroy combinations of powerful families, is the very soul of a republic - While this continues, the people will inevitably possess both power and freedom; when this is lost, power departs, liberty expires, and a commonwealth will inevitably assume some other form. … Let the people have property, and they will have power - a power that will for ever be exerted to prevent a restriction of the press, and the abolition of trial by jury, or the abridgment of any other privilege."

Stan, why did you put communism in my Mystery Document? Alright, so we've got a fan of wealth distribution. But, it isn't Marx because:
a) he's not American,
b) he wasn't born.

There were a bunch of far-left hippies in early America with their hemp-growing and their liberty-espousing. Ugh, I hate the shock pen. Alright, I'm gonna guess that it is noted lexicographer, Noah Webster. AH HA YES! Yes, yes, yes! NAILED IT! Yes. Stan, that was the best one ever. That was my biggest victory to date.

So it's worth remembering that some early Americans proposed a vision of liberty that sprung out of the idea of equality of property, which is very different from the way we imagine liberty today. But ideas of liberty - as diverse as they were - are really at the heart of what makes the American Revolution revolutionary.

And that brings us back to slavery. The most common complaint among American high school students is that the Revolution was deeply hypocritical. I mean, how could this guy write that "All men were created equal" when he himself held slaves? And had kids with one of them. And, even crazier, American colonists, often referred to themselves as slaves because they were denied the right to have a vote in parliament about their taxation.

Now, some people recognized that it was a smidge hypocritical to claim to be enslaved by British taxation while they themselves were ACTUALLY enslaving people. But very few made the leap to say that liberty should mean freedom for the slaves. One exception was James Otis of Massachusetts who wrote, concerning America's slaves, that unless they were free, there could be no liberty: "What man is or ever was born free if every man is not?" But most of the Founders, including this guy and this guy, were the cream of the colonial elites, and so they held slaves and made arguments against abolition.

Like, many historians now argue that Jefferson was trying to condemn slavery in the Declaration of Independence, but without slavery he wouldn't have had his amazing life. I mean, if he'd been working, he couldn't have designed Monticello or stolen all of those ideas from John Locke.

And speaking of Locke, Locke equated liberty with property, and a revolution based on securing property against tyranny couldn't very well turn around and take slaves, who after all were considered property. I mean, Jefferson once calculated that his slaves gave him a better financial return than his real estate investments.

That being said, there were many and frequent protests against slavery. The most vociferous protesters were often African Americans, and in the northern states at least, their pleas were heard. Between 1777 and 1804, all states north of Maryland got rid of slavery, although most did so at a very slow pace and were careful not to deprive slave owners of the value of their property. Like, as late as 1830, there were still about 3,500 slaves in the North; and on the eve of the Civil war there were still 18 in New Jersey. NEW JERSEY. So, the number of free people of color in the U.S. skyrocketed. There were fewer than 10,000 in 1776; by 1810, there were nearly 200,000 free black Americans.

So, in the end, real change came, as it usually does, not through a revolutionary event but through a revolutionary process. To me, the really novel idea that emerged from the American Revolution was of American equality. Now obviously this was (and remains) a vastly unequal social order, but I'm talking about the kind of equality that Gordon Wood described in his famous book "The Radicalism of the American Revolution": The idea that no one American is inherently better than any other.

Prior to the revolution, and certainly in Europe, there were definitely classes of superior people, usually determined by birth. I mean, people knew their place and they were expected to be deferential to their "betters." But all that talk of freedom and inalienable rights introduced the idea that birth wasn't destiny, and that all people should be treated with respect. And the idea that no one should be denied the opportunity to succeed because of who their parents were catalyzed change not just in America but around the world.

And while the U.S. no longer leads in equality of opportunity, that early American idea that we are all equal in our capacity to reason and to work became the foundation not just for the American Revolution, but for many others that would come afterward.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, edited by Stan and Mark Olsen, our associate producer is Danica Johnson, the script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

If you have questions about today's video, good news! There are historians waiting for you in comments. So ask away.

Thanks for watching Crash Course and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.