Tea, Taxes, and The American Revolution: Crash Course World History #28

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History and today you aren't going to get a blow by blow chronology of the American Revolution, and you aren't going to get cool biographical details about Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. But you are going to get me not wearing any pants.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Did you know that George Washington might have had slave teeth implanted into his jaw?

Yeah, I did, Me from the Past, and while it's fun to focus on metaphorically resonant details, what we're concerned with here is why the American Revolution happened and the extent to which it was actually revolutionary. Plus, for the first time in Crash Course history, I have a legitimate chance of getting through an entire episode without butchering a single pronunciation. Unfortunately, next week we will be in France, and je parle français comme un idiot.

(Intro)

So, intellectual historians might put the roots of the American Revolution earlier, but I'm going to start with the end of the 7 Years War in 1763, which as you will recall from last week was:
1. Expensive, and
2. A victory for the British, including British subjects living in America, who now had more land and therefore more money.

Right, so, in 1765 the British government was like, “Hey, since we went into this debt to get you all this new land, we trust that you won't mind if we pass the Stamp Act, in which we place a fancy stamp on your documents, newspapers, playing cards, etc., and in return, you give us money.”

Well, it turns out the colonists weren't so keen on this, not so much because the tax was high because they had no direct representation in the parliament that had levied the tax. And plus, they were cranky about the Crown keeping large numbers of British troops in the colonies even after the end of the 7 Years War.

And then the British government was like, “You are inadequately grateful,” and the colonists were like, “Shut up we hate you,” and the British government was like, “As long as you live under our roof, you live by our rules,” and so on, but eventually the British backed down and repealed the Stamp Act. The repeal inspired a line of commemorative teapots, thereby beginning America's storied tradition of worthless collectible ceramics.

But, in the end, this only emboldened the colonists when the British tried to put new taxes on the Americans in the form of the Townshend Acts. These led to further protests and boycotts and most importantly, more organization among the colonists.

The protests escalated: 1770 saw the Boston Massacre, which with its sum total of five dead was perhaps the least massacrey massacre of all time, and in 1773, a bunch of colonists dumped about a million dollars worth of tea into Boston Harbor, in protest of British government decisions that actually would have made British tea cheaper. Oh it's time for the open letter?

Ah... oh, that did not go well. An Open Letter to Tea. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's a gigantic teabag. Hm. Let's see what flavor it is... Bitter tyranny variety!

Dear Tea,
Like all Americans who love justice and freedom, I hate you. But I understand you're quite popular in the UK where the East India Company would periodically go to war for you.

But, what fascinates me about you, tea, I mean, aside from the fact that people choose to drink you when there are great American refreshments available, like Mountain Dew, is that even though you're stereotypically English, you're not English. It's Chinese, or Burmese, or Indian. No one really knows, but it's definitely not English. You didn't even have tea until, like, the 1660s. Posers.

Best wishes, John Green

So, The Boston Tea Party led to further British crackdowns and then mobilization of colonial militias and then Paul Revere and then actual war, but you can hear all about that stuff on, like, TV miniseries. I want to focus on one of the ways that colonists protested unfair taxation. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

As previously noted, the English Crown benefited tremendously from the import of consumer goods to the American colonies, and one of the most effective ways American colonists could protest taxation without representation was by boycotting British products.

In order to enforce these boycotts, the protesters created Committees of Correspondence, which spread information about who was and was not observing the boycotts. And these committees also could coerce non-compliers into compliance - which is to say that they were creating and enforcing policy, kind of like a government does.

The Maryland Committee of Correspondence, in fact, was instrumental in setting up the first Continental Congress, which convened to coordinate a response to the fighting that started in 1775. This was back when congresses did things, by the way. It was awesome.

Anyway, the Continental Congress is most famous for drafting and approving the Declaration of Independence. No, Thought Bubble. That's the Will Smith vehicle Independence Day. I mean the Declaration of Independence. Right, that one. It's not your fault, you guys are Canadian. You've never declared independence. Worth noting, by the way, that the congress edited out more than a quarter of Jefferson's original declaration, and he forever after insisted they’d "mangled" it.

Anyway, I would argue the heavy lifting of the American Revolution was already done by the Declaration. In truth, by the time the shooting started, most of the colonists were already self-governing and had developed a sense of themselves as something separate and different from Great Britain - as evidenced by these "Committees of Correspondence," which functioned as shadow governments - eventually reaching out to foreign governments, establishing an espionage network, tarring and feathering loyalists and royal officials which, by the way is incredibly painful and dangerous to the victim, and even recruiting physicians to tell American men that drinking British tea would make them weak and effeminate. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Now, despite all this, about 20% of colonists remained loyal to Great Britain throughout the war, especially in the major cities that Britain occupied. Also lots of slaves continued to support the British, especially after Britain promised that any slaves who fought with them would be freed.

And it's worth noting that while we generally celebrate the Revolution and see it as a step toward justice and equality, the people who most needed the protection of a government might have been better off and more free, if Britain had won. Especially since Britain ended slavery well before America did, and, you know, without a civil war.

Also, even though most Americans had come to see themselves as separate from Britain before 1776, the British certainly didn't see it

that way. They continued to fight either until 1781 or 1783, depending on whether you calculate by when they actually gave up or when the peace treaty was signed.

So you can't really say the American Revolution was won before the fighting even started. But the truth is, the American Revolution and the war for independence weren't like this. They were like this.

So, here's what was pretty revolutionary about the American Revolution: The colonists threw off the rule of an imperial monarchy and replaced it with a government that didn't have a king, a radical idea in a world that didn't feature many non-monarchical forms of government.

And, if you look at the explanations for the revolution, especially those contained in, like, the Declaration of Independence and in pamphlets, like Thomas Paine's Common Sense, there's definitely a revolutionary zeal that's informed by the Enlightenment. And that's especially true if you focus on the idea of liberty, as many of the pamphleteers did.

That said, if you look at the actual outcome of the revolution, aside from the whole no king thing, it wasn't that revolutionary. Let's look, for instance, at two ideas central to the revolution: property rights and equality.

So the Articles of Confederation gave the government no power to tax, which had the effect of making sure that people who had property were able to keep it because they never had to pay the government anything in exchange for the right to own and use it. And that's very different from taxation systems dating all the way back to, like, Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt.

And it's probably not a coincidence that most of the writers and signers of the Declaration of Independence were men of property, and they wanted to keep it that way. So, basically, the white guys who controlled the land and its production before the American Revolution were the same white guys who controlled it after the American Revolution.

And this leads us to the second, and more important way that as a revolution, the American one falls a bit short. So, if you've ever studied American history, you're probably familiar with the greatest line in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Sorry, ladies.

And, you also may know that at the time those words were written, a large segment of the American population, perhaps as much as 30%, were slaves of African descent who were held as property and were definitely, 100% not treated as equal to whites. In fact, the guy who wrote those words held slaves, and was fighting against a government who promised to free any slaves who supported it.

Furthermore, women couldn't vote, and neither could white men who didn't own enough property - meaning that the government of, for, and by the people was, in fact of, for, and by about 10-15% of the people.

But here's the real question: Was the American Revolution what the historian Jonathan Israel called “a revolution of mind?” Did it change the way we think about what people are and how we should organize ourselves? Addressing those questions will involve a brief foray into the history of ideas. Let's study the Enlightenment!

The Enlightenment was primarily a celebration of humans' ability to understand and improve the natural world through reason. The Enlightenment had a number of antecedents, including the European Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution, but what made it special was that some of its more radical proponents - like, Immanuel Kant, for instance - went so far as to argue that human reason rendered a belief in God unnecessary and, by extension, proclaimed that any belief in divine intervention or a divine plan for humanity was just superstition.

Given that this was coming out of an overwhelmingly Christian Europe, this was a pretty controversial suggestion, and not all Enlightenment thinkers would go that far. And more moderate Enlightenment thinkers were also more willing to countenance hierarchical social and political structures.

Like John Locke, a major Enlightenment thinker, formulated his version of inalienable rights as life, liberty, and property. And that's much more traditional than arguing, for instance, that property should be held communally.

And it's no coincidence that the more moderate Enlightenment thinkers, like Locke and Adam Smith, happened to be British, and the real radicals were French. And the founders of the United States, were far more closely linked to those British Enlightenment thinkers than to the French, who influenced the French Revolution, which as we will see next week, goes swimmingly.

But even if the government that America's revolutionaries came up with didn't overturn privilege or tear apart the social order as the French Revolution tried to do, it did make significant changes. America made sure that there would never be a formal nobility, except for the Count of Chocula.

And, it recognized the equal rights of daughters and widows, when it came to inheriting and possessing property. Also, it created a world in which future countesses could rehabilitate their reputations in New York.

But, the real seismic change was that after the Revolution, Americans came to view themselves as equal to each other. And, in the context of the 18th century, that was pretty radical. "Ordinary Americans came to believe that no one in a basic down-to-earth and day-in-and-day-out manner was really better than anyone else. That was equality as no other nation had ever quite had it."

And in the end, the ideas of the American revolution - ideas about property and equality and representation - are still hugely important in shaping political discourse around the world, and particularly in America. And by America, I mean the United States. I'm sorry Canadians and Mexicans and Central Americans and South Americans. We're provincial, okay? I mean, here in the United States, our Presidential candidates must both know how to wear a suit and how to bowl.

But the American Revolution also reminds us - as the French one will next week - that revolutionary ideas and values are not always easy to live up to. Nothing challenges one's belief in equality quite like becoming rich and powerful. Indeed, rare is the revolutionary who doesn't become, on some level, like Orwell's pigs, insisting that while all animals were created equal, some were created more equal than others.

In short, if you're going to base your new society on philosophy, you should try to found it on ideals that are as inclusive and humanistic as possible - because the people executing those ideas will never be ideal. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

(Credits)

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, our graphics team is Thought Bubble, and we are ably interned by Meredith Danko.

Last week's phrase of the week was "Historian Feuds." If you want to suggest future phrases of the week, or guess at this one you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

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