

When war began between Britain and the American colonists, it seemed likely that Britain would win. It was the most powerful country in the world at that time. The British government had a trained army and one-third of the people in the colonies remained loyal to them. The colonists who supported the struggle against Britain were known as the Patriots. At first they did not have an army or even a leader. Four things helped the Patriots to win against the odds:

- The choice of George Washington as commander-in-chief of the American army.
- The distance between Britain and America.
- The inspiration of the ideas contained in the Declaration of Independence.
- France joining in on the side of the Americans in 1778.

The Battle of Bunker Hill

At this time an American army was besieging General Gage's troops in Boston. Washington set out to lead it, but before he arrived the Americans were defeated in a battle at Bunker Hill. Washington found the American army in terrible shape. He set out to impose discipline. Soldiers who deserted were executed and one officer was whipped in front of his men. Washington wanted to drive the British from Boston. In March 1776 he began to bombard the city with cannon fire. American troops now surrounded Boston and the British commander General Howe realised that he could not hold out. On the night of 17 March the British troops left Boston.

Thomas Paine and *Common Sense*

Although war had started, the Patriots were still not sure if they wanted to leave the British Empire. Most of them were descended from British settlers and they were still loyal to King George. All this changed in January 1776 when a pamphlet called *Common Sense* appeared. It was written by an Englishman, Thomas Paine. In a plain and easy-to-understand style, he urged Americans to declare their independence and become a republic. Over 150,000 copies of *Common Sense* were sold and it had a huge impact on the Patriots.

The Declaration of independence

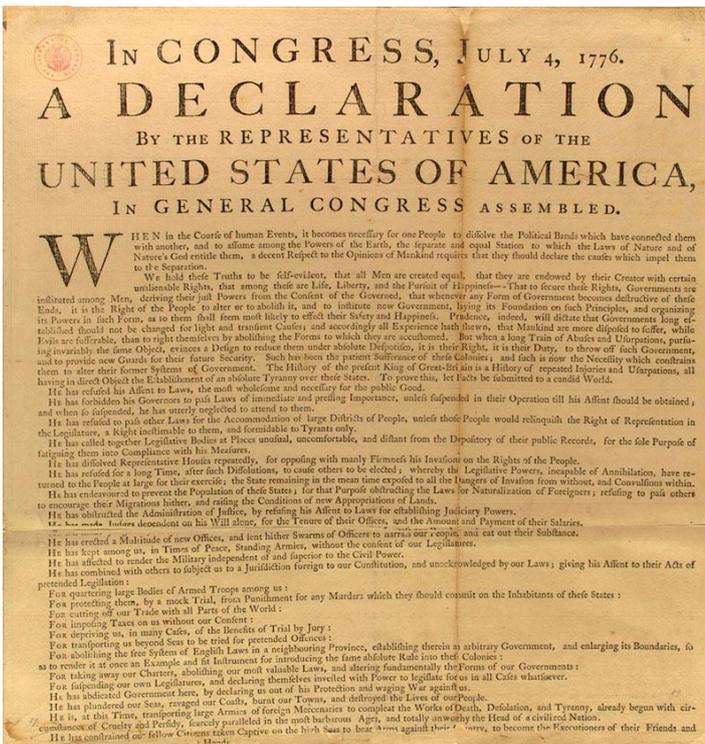
On 4 July 1776 the Congress issued the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson, a delegate from Virginia, wrote it. It claimed that King George had failed to protect the rights of the American people and stated that:

A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be a ruler of a Free People.

Below is the most famous extract from the declaration.

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; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government.

The ideas contained within this extract were very advanced for the time. It says that a person has certain rights given to him/her from God. To protect these rights, people form governments. If governments fail to protect these rights then the people have a right to form a new government.



Jefferson is saying that the British government, by behaving as it did, lost the confidence of the American people. Therefore a new government should be formed in its place. These ideas were to have a lot of influence in France in 1789. Kings or queens ruled most countries in Europe, including France, at the time. They saw their power to govern as coming not from the people but from God. Which enlightenment philosophers do you think most influenced the American Declaration of Independence?

The Declaration of Independence raised American spirits but in 1776 and 1777 the war went badly for them. Washington found it hard to keep his army together. Unlike the British, who had full-time soldiers, his army was made up of ordinary men who joined up for six months at a time. Many of them were farmers and when their six months was up, they often went home to look after the farm.

Valley Forge

In September 1776, the British captured New York, which became the British base for the rest of the war. In 1777, British forces under Lord Cornwallis captured Philadelphia where the Congress met. This was a major blow to the new republic. Washington and his men were forced to retreat to a wild and lonely spot called Valley Forge. Here his army spent the winter of 1777-8 in horrible conditions. Food was short and rations were reduced to one-eighth of normal. Disease was widespread and over 2,500 men died. Many soldiers deserted, and Washington and his officers struggled to maintain discipline. Washington won the admiration of his men by remaining with them at Valley Forge. A French nobleman, the Marquis de Lafayette, was there too. He greatly admired what the Americans were doing. Later he played a major role in the French revolution.

France comes to the aid of the Americans

But while Washington and his men were suffering in Valley Forge, another American army defeated the British at Saratoga. When news of this reached Europe, King Louis XVI of France decided the Americans might win. He declared war on Britain. He wanted revenge for the British conquest of Canada. French help was vital to the Americans. French troops were useful but the French navy was even more important. It made it difficult for the British navy to bring guns, ammunition and fresh soldiers to equip the British armies in America.

Victory at Yorktown

The final event in the war showed how important the French fleet was. Washington trapped a small British army under their commander-in-chief, Lord Cornwallis, in Yorktown. A French fleet arrived in the harbour and prevented Cornwallis from escaping. Cornwallis had no option but to surrender. He said he was ill and sent his second-in-command, General O'Hara. Washington sent his second-in-command, General Benjamin Lincoln, to accept the British surrender on 19 October 1781. When the British Prime Minister, Lord North, heard this news he said, 'Oh God! It is all over!' It was! The British had lost their thirteen American colonies.

A new Constitution for the United States

The thirteen colonies then had to decide how they would govern themselves. Should they have a king or a president, and how much power should they give him? It took them five years to work out a new Constitution (a set of laws for governing a country). Here are some of the points in it:

- The head of the government would be the President. He was to be elected and to hold office for four years.
- There were to be two Houses of Congress: the House of Representatives to represent the people and the Senate to represent the states (formerly the colonies).
- The Constitution guaranteed human rights to citizens. These included the right to free speech, to a fair trial and to freedom of religion. No one in Europe had such rights at that time.
- A Supreme Court would make sure that all laws agreed with the Constitution.



Which Enlightenment philosophers influenced the American Constitution?

The Americans chose this as their flag. The thirteen stars and stripes represent the original thirteen states. Later, a new star was added whenever a new state was formed. How many stars are there today? In 1789, the Americans invited Washington to be the first President of the United States

Activity

Write an essay plan that explains why the Patriots won the war against Britain. Firstly explain why the British were expected to win and then plan **four** paragraphs that explain why they lost: one on the leadership of Washington, one on the distance between Britain and America, one on the inspirational ideas and a last on the importance of French support. For each paragraph follow the Point Explanation Example method. In conclusion, which do you think was the most important reason for the defeat of the British and why?