

## Option 2: Fight for Independence

Although full scale war had erupted a year earlier—several coastal towns were nearly destroyed by early 1776—many Americans still hoped for reconciliation with Britain. In 1776 more Patriots began arguing to Independence, but it was not a popular idea until two documents of inestimable influence spurred many Americans to commit to independence—Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* of January 1776 and the Declaration of Independence, written primarily by Thomas Jefferson and adopted in July 1776 by the Second Continental Congress. Both documents stressed the absolute necessity of independence: that no other option was left to preserve American rights and liberty.

Damn the king and damn Parliament! They have murdered our fathers and brothers, burned our homes, and stolen our property. Is this how a loving parent treats her children? The ties that once bound us to the mother country have been broken by British force. Now we must stand up for ourselves. The brave souls who came here to find the religious freedom and economic opportunity they were denied in England have built a new society. By right, we are entitled to independence. Feelings of gratitude and obligation toward Britain are misplaced. Britain has not protected our interests, but its own. Trade regulations were not intended to benefit the colonies, but to enrich Britain. Moreover, this conflict was started by British officials, not by us. The British took it upon themselves to close our ports, ban our assemblies, take away our property, and fire upon our citizens. There is no longer good reason to remain tied to Britain. Our population is growing rapidly and in fifty years will surpass that of Britain. Our land is fertile and without limits, and our God-given resources dwarf those of the British Isles. Our trade would expand. Without the restrictions imposed by London, new markets in Europe would be open to American goods. Our merchants would be free to import products from France, Spain, Holland, or any other nation. Even the British would soon be eager for our trade. Independence will be a boon to our economy. Independence will also permit us to develop along the path we have set for ourselves. From all over Europe, freedom-loving men who wish to be judged by their abilities and not by their birth would be attracted to our shores. Our foreign relations would be of our choosing. No longer would we be drawn into London's distant wars. The British cannot wage war in the colonies for long. Their supply lines stretch to the other side of the Atlantic, and the French and the Spanish will see an opportunity to weaken their rival by supporting our cause—even now, there are reports that French aid is on the way. God gave each of us the sacred natural rights of life, liberty, and security in our property. No power on earth can take these away without our consent. As John Locke asserted, we have an obligation to overthrow a government that violates its duty to protect our fundamental rights. We have the moral authority to establish a government that will promote our well-being. Past divisions among the colonies will fade away once a continental government of our own replaces British rule. Last year, it was the farmers of Lexington who were massacred. Who will be next? There is no turning back. We must strike out for freedom.

### Supporting Arguments for Independence

1. An independent America will be free of Britain's senseless wars and will enjoy unrestricted trade relations with the other nations of Europe.
2. Without the burdens of British imperial policy, American industry and commerce will be free to grow and prosper.
3. An independent America will be able to draw on the services of capable leaders ready for the responsibilities of self-government.

### Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Independence

1. America is strong enough to stand on its own—without the false protection of Britain's distant power. Logic and nature dictate that the colonies govern themselves.
2. Disputes among the American colonies will fade away once we are responsible for governing ourselves.
3. Britain has rejected attempts at compromise, especially since blood has been shed.

## Option 2: Fight for Independence

*Edmund Burke, a conservative political theorist, made this speech before the British House of Commons in 1775, pleading for reconciliation with the colonies. Burke's argument fell on deaf ears.*

The causes of this disobedient spirit in the colonies comes fourfold. Americans are:

- #1: descendents of Englishmen, proud of their representative legislatures
- #2: Protestant Christians, proud of independent thought and opinion; including –northern non-Anglican dissenters –southern slaveholders, who value freedom as “a kind of rank and privilege”
- #3: students of the law, able to think logically and argue forcefully
- #4: colonists separated by an ocean from the mother country

Slavery they can have anywhere. Freedom they can have from none but you. Deny them this participation in freedom and you break that sole bond which originally made, and must still preserve, the unity of the empire.

2

*Source: This excerpt is from “Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms,” issued by the Second Continental Congress on July 5, 1775. The war had broken out in April, when British forces had marched to Lexington and Concord, two villages just outside of Boston.*

(The British declare) that Parliament can “of right make laws to bind us in all cases whatsoever.” What is to defend us against so enormous, so unlimited a power? We are reduced to the alternative of choosing an unconditional submission to the tyranny of irritated (British officials), or resistance by force. – The latter is our choice...

We assure them [the British] that we mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us, and which we sincerely wish to see restored. – Necessity has not yet driven us into that desperate measure...We have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great-Britain, and establishing independent states. We fight not for glory or for conquest...[but for] milder conditions than servitude or death.

3

*This is an excerpt from a letter written by George Washington to his friend George William Fairfax in the aftermath of the Battle of Bunker [Breed's] Hill in 1775.*

“If I was in any doubt, as to the right which the Parliament of Great Britain had to tax us without our consent, I should most heartily coincide with you in opinion, that to petition, and petition only, is the proper method to apply for relief...I think the Parliament of Great Britain hath no more right to put their hands into my pockets, without my consent, than I have to put my hands into yours for money; and this being already urged to them in a firm, but decent manner, by all the colonies, what reason is there to expect anything from their justice?”

Unhappy it is though to reflect, that a Brother's Sword has been sheathed in a Brother's breast, and that, the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with Blood, or Inhabited by Slaves. Sad alternative! But can a virtuous Man hesitate in his choice?

I am, With sincere Regard and Affectionate compliments to Mrs Fairfax, Dear Sir, Your Most obt servant,

G. Washington”

4

**Source: The Olive Branch Petition:** *As the Second Continental Congress convened in May 1775, one question dominated debate—should America seek to defend its liberties inside or outside the empire? In its first actions the Congress reflected the conflicted mind of the delegates and the American people: it raised an army while pleading with the king for reconciliation. This petition, issued on July 5, was a final plea to King George that affirmed the colonies' loyalty to Britain and urged him to undo the damage done to their allegiance by the “delusive pretenses, fruitless terrors, and unavailing severities” of the king's cabinet since 1763. The king refused to receive the petition and declared the colonies—“misled by dangerous and ill designing men”—to be in a state of armed rebellion.*

“We think ourselves required...to use all the means in our power, not incompatible with our safety, for stopping the further effusion of blood and for averting the impending calamities that threaten the British empire...”

## Option 2: Fight for Independence

We solemnly assure your Majesty that we not only most ardently desire the former harmony between her and these Colonies may be restored, but that a concord may be established between them upon so firm a basis as to perpetuate its blessings, uninterrupted by any future dissensions.”

5

These excerpts are from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published in January 1776. This popular pamphlet helps to convince many Americans the conflict with England was beyond peaceful settlement and that independence was America's only course.

“Men of passive tempers look somewhat lightly over the offenses of Great Britain, and, still hoping for the best, are apt to call out, “Come, come we shall be friends again for all this”. But... Then tell me whether you can hereafter love, honor, and faithfully serve the power that hath carried fire and sword into your land?”

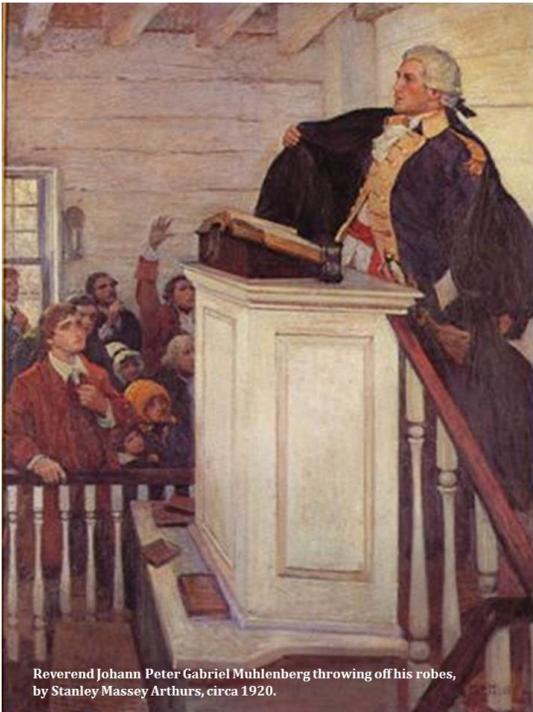
... No man was a warmer wisher for a (peaceful settlement) than myself, before the fatal 19th of April 1775 (the battles of Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, occurred on this day), but the moment the event of that day was made known, I rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered (King of England) for ever.”

6

These excerpts are from “The Declaration of Independence”, adopted by the Continental Congress of July 4, 1776.

“The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations (unlawful seizures), all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms; our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

7



Reverend Johann Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg throwing off his robes, by Stanley Massey Arthurs, circa 1920.

Document 1: Hamner, Christopher. *Enduring Battle: American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776-1945*.

The Black Robe Regiment was not an actual detachment in the Continental Army but rather a British epithet for the influence preachers exerted in support of the Patriot cause. Advocates of the British crown found preachers' support of the Patriot cause particularly detrimental to their efforts to maintain loyalty among the colonists. Such clergymen provided sanction for the cause of independence as well as formal support for the military effort. In the 1770s, most colonists still considered themselves aligned with England. From their pulpits, these members of the Black Robe Regiment reassured their audiences that their revolution was justified in the eyes of God. Winning and maintaining the support of the population was critical in the American War for Independence, which relied heavily on the support of volunteers and the general population.