

America on the World Stage
Teacher Scholars Program, Module 1
What connections, if any, exist between the English Civil War and the American Revolution?

Background Essay

To many the American Revolution is a very familiar story line. The colonists were British citizens being poorly treated by their king. They rose up as one, united for the first time. They looked to the Enlightenment philosophers for new ideas about government. Not only is this not the whole story, it is a common belief that the ideas behind the American Revolution were revolutionary, but many of those same ideas drove the English Civil War. They were neither new nor revolutionary. They had been around for more than one hundred years and were British in origin. This knowledge forces us to look at American history in a new light.

We throw around the words such as revolution and revolutionary and trust that students understand their meaning. What constitutes a revolution? What constitutes revolutionary ideas? According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (6th. ed.), revolution is defined as “a period or instance of significant change or radical alteration;” revolutionary is defined as “involving or constituting radical change.” On the surface, the American Revolution can absolutely be defined as revolutionary. Overthrowing the king definitely involved a radical change in government, but were the ideas behind it truly revolutionary?

Brinton argues that there are parallels to be found in a variety of revolutions. He specifically compares the English Civil War, the American Revolution, French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. He lists some of the commonalities, “government deficits, more than usual complaints over taxation, conspicuous governmental favoring of one set of economic interests over another...” (65) but goes on to state, “...people never seem to expect revolution for themselves, but only for their children. The actual revolution is always a surprise.” (66) Could it be that the ideas themselves are not revolutionary?

A group of citizens believed the king was treating them unfairly. They were being taxed without their consent. The legislature was dismissed when it pleased the King. Once he dissolved the legislature, he refused to call another one for lengthy periods of time. Though these may seem familiar complaints from the Declaration of Independence, these complaints were lodged by citizens of London in September, 1640. In his memoirs, Edmund Ludlow (1894) wrote,

“The question in dispute between the King's party and us being, as I apprehended, whether the King should govern as a god by his will...or whether the people should be governed by laws made by themselves, and live under a government derived from their own consent.” (xvii).

Though John Locke would not write of the “consent of the governed” for another 50 years, Ludlow pointed to this as one of the main disputes between King Charles I and Parliament.

Historian Bernard Bailyn (1967, p.54) argues, “It was in terms of this pattern of ideas and attitudes – originating in the English Civil War and carried forward with additions and modifications... that the colonists responded to the

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new regulations imposed by England on her American colonies after 1763.”
(p.54).

One hundred and twenty years after the beginning of the English Civil War, British colonists in North America were voicing very similar complaints. King George III was repeating many of Charles I's mistakes: representative houses were being dissolved, he refused to convene new legislative sessions, and Parliament was taxing colonists despite the fact that colonists were not represented there. In speaking out against the Stamp Act, Patrick Henry was quoted as saying “Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I his Cromwell, and George III may profit by their example.” (Preston, 1970, p. 3, 5). Political cartoonists of the time also used the imagery of Charles I's head on a pike after the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766. (Preston, 1970, p. 5). While colonists may have been quoting Locke, Hobbes and Paine they were also consciously aware, as Patrick Henry's speech and several political cartoons show, of the influence of the actions of Charles I, Oliver Cromwell and their respective supporters.

It could be argued, using British history as a guide, that Britain repudiated many of the sentiments which led to the English Civil War with the restoration of Charles II to the throne. Did the British repudiate the sentiments or the government it produced? There are many who believe that Oliver Cromwell and the Protectorate were worse than Charles I had been. According to the Earl of Clarendon (1767, p. 509), “In a word, he was guilty of many crimes for which he will be damned and for which hell-fire is prepared.” But the ideas of the English Civil War did not die out with the Restoration. The English Civil War influenced the writings of English philosophers John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon.

When we look at the American Revolution in isolation, we miss a vital opportunity to show students the world outside the United States. King George III ignored the pleas of the colonists; just as King Charles I ignored the pleas of the British people in the 1630s and 1640s. Just as students need to understand that the American colonists did not rise up as one, united body, they must also understand that the ideas that drove the American Revolution did not spring fully-formed, brand-new into the minds of the Founding Fathers. American history is enriched by acknowledging our history as part of the British Empire.

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Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Title: A legal complaint about “ship money”

Author: Sir Richard Strode, August 1639

Link: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/civilwar/g3/cs1/s2/>

Summary: A complaint involving “ship money”, which is a kind of tax. Sir Richard Strode believed this tax was illegal and could not be instituted without the consent of Parliament. This document can be used to compare the complaints of the English people in 1639 with the complaints of colonists in the 1760s and 1770s.

Title: A document setting out the wishes of Parliament

Author: Members of Parliament, December 1640

Link: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/civilwar/g3/cs2/s3/>

Summary: Parliament describes what it believes is the role of Parliament in government. It specifically mentions the idea of dissolving Parliament without its own consent. One of the grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence involves the King dissolving representative houses at his discretion and for calling them in “places unusual,” making it difficult for the representatives to conduct business. This shows a link between the complaints of the British and the colonists.

Title: A petition from the citizens of London

Author: Unknown, September 1640

Link: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/civilwar/g3/cs2/s1/>

Summary: This document is a list of complaints from the citizens of London. Among the complaints, “demanding and unusual taxes upon goods”, “seldom calling and sudden ending of Parliaments”, “The many monopolies...causing trade in the city...to decline...” This document could be used alongside the Declaration of Independence to show that Londoners in 1639 and American colonists in 1776 appeared to have similar complaints about their king.

Title: The Declaration of Independence

Author: Jefferson, Thomas et al, July, 1776

Link: <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html>

Summary: This document lays out the reasoning for the American Revolution. It lists the colonists’ grievances with the king, which include taxation without representation, dissolving legislative bodies and refusing to call new ones. The Declaration states that government gets its power from the “consent of the governed,” that when government does not protect the people’s rights, “it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.” By starting with this document, with the familiar, students and teachers will have a basis for comparison with documents from the English Civil War. To truly understand the links between the American Revolution and the English Civil War it is not enough to know that “all men are created equal...” Students and teachers must understand the document in its entirety.

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Title: Stamp Act political cartoon

Illustrator: Unknown

Link: <http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3a00000/3a05000/3a05300/3a05303r.jpg>

Summary: This political cartoon depicts a funeral procession for the Stamp Act. It is led by George Grenville, a supporter of the Stamp Act. The use of the skulls on wooden pikes is thought to evoke the image of Charles I's execution.



Title: "'Tis Oliver's Cause" political cartoon

Illustrator: Unknown

Link: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/f0305s.jpg>

Summary: This political cartoon suggests that the American Revolution and the English Civil War have common causes. One of the people in the cartoon is holding a Liberty flag and saying, "'Tis Oliver's cause no monarchy nor laws."

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Secondary Sources

BBC and Open University. (n.d.). *Civil War 1625-1649*. Retrieved October 24, 2009 from <http://www.open2.net/civilwar/>

A primer on the English Civil War. This website gives both a quick overview of the English Civil War as well as an in-depth look at the war. The site allows a teacher to do as much or as little research as they feel they might need in order to learn about the English Civil War. In addition to pages for each stage of the war, there is also a timeline and a page about important individuals.

Bailyn, Bernard (1967). *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. (pages 34-54 and 198-210) Boston. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

The book explains how the ideas which originally drove the English Civil War were added to and expanded by 18th century philosophers and writers. Bailyn argues that writers like Algernon Sidney, John Locke, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon contributed to the ideas about government that originated in the ramp up to the English Civil War. This was a great resource that led to additional sources.

Brinton, Crane (1965). *The Anatomy of a Revolution*. New York. Vintage Books (Random House).

Brinton compares the English Civil War, the American, French and Russian Revolutions. He discusses the commonalities found in each of the revolutions, while also acknowledging that they are not identical. This is a great resource to show that the “revolutionary ideas” are not necessarily limited to one group of people in one country at one time.

Hibbert, Christopher (1992). 1603-1660 Early Stuart England. In *The Story of England*. (124-135). New York. Phaidon Press.

This chapter offers the teacher some very basic background on the English Civil War. It briefly explains the reign of King James I and the idea of the divine right of kings. It moves into the reign of Charles I, how he tried to expand his father’s idea of absolute authority and how he tried to rule without Parliament. Rebellion in Scotland forces Charles I to call Parliament, but when things do not go as planned, he dissolves it. This chapter manages to condense many complicated ideas, including the role of government, taxation and state-controlled religion into an easily digestible summary of the events surrounding the English Civil War.

Hughes, Ann (1998). *The Causes of the English Civil War*. New York. St. Martin’s Press, Inc.

Hughes leaves no stone unturned in laying out many possible causes of the English Civil War. She looks at the English Civil War through many different lenses, including that it was one part of a larger European problem, and that it had roots in social, cultural and political causes.

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Hyde, Edward, Earl of Clarendon (1767-1786). *The History of the Great Rebellion*. Vol. III, part 1, p.432, p.509). Clarendon Printing House. Retrieved on October 30, 2009 from http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/civilwar/popups/g6cs2s5_stranscript.htm

The Earl of Clarendon was a Royalist. His opinion on Cromwell's rule is decidedly biased, but shows how some people felt about Cromwell after his death. According to the British National Archives website, the Earl of Clarendon may also have had reason to dislike the royal family. It bolsters the argument that the British public may have preferred a Stuart monarch than another republican government with a ruler like Cromwell.

Ludlow, Edmund and Firth, Charles Harding (1894). *The memoirs of Edmund Ludlow, lieutenant-general of the horse in the army of the commonwealth of England, 1625-1672*. (xvii). London. Oxford University Press. Retrieved on October 30, 2009 from

http://www.archive.org/stream/memoirsedmundlu01firtgoog/memoirsedmundlu01firtgoog_djvu.txt.

This source can be cumbersome if you're not sure what you're looking for. The BBC movie mentioned a quote from Ludlow that went to the heart of government deriving its power from the consent of the governed. The quote can be found in this memoir. There were additional quotes on the same topic, involving Cromwell's government, which would be helpful if one were to extend this topic into a unit on the Constitution.

Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation. "Henry's Early Life and Times – 1765." *Red Hill – Patrick Henry National Memorial*. Retrieved on October 30, 2009 from

http://www.patrickhenry.com/life/1765_2.html.

In this speech Henry appears to warn King George III not to follow in the steps of Caesar and more importantly for this research, Charles I. When calls of treason are heard in the chamber, he allegedly replied, "Sir, if this be treason, make the most of it." While no definitive copies of the text remain, every version I found included the Charles I reference.

Preston, Paula Sampson. (1970). The Severed Head of Charles I of England Its Use as a Political Stimulus. *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 6, 1-13. The University of Chicago Press. Retrieved October 11, 2009 from

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180520>.

Using political cartoons, Preston shows how people, including colonists, used the image of Charles I severed head to make a political point in the years following the English Civil War. She specifically uses a political cartoon marking the "death" of the Stamp Act. This article also referenced a speech by Patrick Henry, leading to another primary source linking the ideas of the English Civil War to the American Revolution.

Schama, Simon. (Writer, Presenter). (2001). The British Wars (1603-1649). *History of Britain – The Complete Collection* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: British Broadcasting Company.

This portion of the documentary deals directly with the issue of the English Civil War. Simon Schama makes a direct correlation between the ideas presented by the Parliamentarians, specifically Edward Ludlow, the American Revolution and the French

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Revolution. This documentary was helpful in finding additional resources to support the idea that the English Civil War influenced the American Revolution.