

**AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE**  
**Teaching Scholars Program**  
**Jennifer Orr, Greene County Public Schools (VA)**

**Title: Why War?**

**Primary Investigative Question(s)** – *What efforts were made by Britain and/or the colonists to avoid the armed conflict known as the American Revolution?*

**SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH**

**Contextual Essay**

When Americans think about the Revolutionary War, almost everyone thinks about the reasons the colonists wanted freedom, the major battles and the political leaders of the time. Most of us learned in school that the colonists had no choice but to fight. But did they? Was anyone looking to solve these conflicts peacefully? Was it possible that the colonists could retain their allegiance with England, and have the representation they were seeking? While it is often overlooked there were a number of people who were seeking a way to avoid an armed conflict, in the colonies and in Britain.

The colonies in America had maintained a peaceful allegiance to the English due to a policy laid down by Robert Walpole, prime minister under King George I. Walpole believed “if the colonies were left to run their own local affairs with minimal interference from London, they would produce more wealth and commerce, prosper, and give less trouble.” (Cook, 3) That relationship worked for both countries and America grew from a small group at Jamestown to over a million people by 1760. Each colony had their own charter, which was different from the others. They had their own legislatures, ran their own civil affairs, and collected their own taxes. The royal governors only used their powers sparingly, but could veto legislation, appoint or dismiss officials and decide on judicial matters. They were simply around to keep the peace, and avoid trouble. As Benjamin Franklin observed, “The colonies cost England nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons, or armies to keep them in subjugation. They were governed at the expense of a little pen, ink and paper.” (Cook, 3)

This all changed when King George III ascended the throne in October 1760. He was 22 years old when he began his rein. “He was headstrong and obstinate, full of youthful prejudices, lacking in humility, wisdom, or vision, with little interest in the opinion of others. But he was also hardworking, prudish, religious and moral. He came to the throne determined not merely to reign but to rule.” (Cook, 5) He surrounded himself with governments of inexperienced, narrow-minded men who he believed were loyal to him. He had five different prime ministers during the first ten years of his rein. With the king’s support, these governments began imposing more control over the colonies in America. With his Imperial power looming, the colonies in America realized things were changing.

Benjamin Franklin made great strides in maintaining peace between the colonies and Britain. From 1764-1774, Franklin lived in London as an agent of the Pennsylvania assembly. He believed “that America was the future center of the British Empire” (Morgan, 147), and that the future grew out of the present. Franklin saw his task to make life useful and beneficial to the people in the greatest empire in the world. He did not see his task as difficult. He believed the British Empire was a working system, but there were a few flaws that needed correcting. The largest flaw he identified was that some of the laws favored the subjects (in Britain) at the expense of other subjects (in America). “If the future strength of the empire lay in its American qualities, it was high time to correct that inequity, the more so as the successful war with France had opened the way for American growth to proceed as never before.”

(Morgan, 148) The trouble was that his role was not as an officer of government, rather he was a propagandist. Franklin did not actually have any power to vote or speak directly to the important members of Parliament. It was a time of constant reflection for Franklin, where he would be forced to evaluate the beliefs he had had for the sixty years.

In 1765, George Grenville suggested that Parliament pass the Stamp Act. This required that colonists to pay tax on all imported papers, including marriage licenses, deeds for land, newspapers, customs documents, and even playing cards. Grenville denied that it violated the rights of the colonists, and challenged any Member of Parliament who disputed it. He argued, "it was one of Parliament's rights to tax the colonies." (Monroe, 150) Benjamin Franklin believed that they needed to stop talking about "rights of the colonist" and focus on the tax itself. He suggested that Great Britain provide paper money to the colonists and establish a colonial loan office. The paper bills would be legal tender but it could only be redeemed after a 6% yearly interest was paid. Franklin believed it would make both sides happy – the colonists would not be taxed on everyday items, and Britain would still get tax revenue from the colonists. As far as Franklin could tell Parliament would make the same amount, but the colonists would not mind paying the tax directly on money. However, "Mr. Grenville paid little attention to it, being besotted with his stamp scheme." (Morgan, 150)

The only debate of the Stamp Act took place on February 6. Charles Townshend, a loyalist speaking on behalf of the government said, "Now, will these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished by our indulgence until grown to a degree of strength and opulence, protected by our arms, will they grudge to contribute a mite to relieve us from the heavy weight of that burden which we lie under for their defense?" (Cook, 67)

Issac Barre, veteran and Member of Parliament rose and gave the following empowered speech in response,

"They, planted by *your* care? No! Your oppression planted 'em in America...They, nourished by *your* Indulgence? They grew up by your neglect of 'Em; as soon as you began to about 'Em, that care was exercised in sending persons to rule over 'Em – sent to spy out their Liberty, to misrepresent their Actions, to prey on 'Em...They, protected by *your* Arms? They have nobly taken up Arms in your defense... I claim to know more of America than most of you, having seen and been conversant in that Country. The People I believe are as truly Loyal as any Subjects to King has, but a people Jealous of their Liberties who will vindicate them, if ever they should be violated – but the subject is too delicate and I will say no more." (Cook, 67-68)

He attempted to warn Parliament that a revolution could be in the making, but that was not something Grenville or many members of the House of Commons believed. While the speech was noted as "handsome and moving" (Cook 68) Grenville vote by a vote of 245 to 49, in favor of the Stamp Act.

Opposition to the Stamp Act was not limited to the colonies. British merchants were losing business because the colonists imposed an embargo on trade with Britain. The only way to force obedience on the colonists was to send more troops. But where would they find them, and how would they be paid?

Parliament revisited the issue of the Stamp Act in February 1766. William Pitt, a member of Parliament who was ill when the Stamp Act passed, "savagely rejected Grenville's suggestion that to support the Americans was to condone sedition," (Derry, 76) by giving one of his most famous oratories, "I rejoice that America has resisted. Three millions of people, so dead to all feelings of liberty as voluntarily to submit to be slaves, would make fit instruments to make slaves of the rest..." (Derry, 76). He went out of his way to support America and insult Grenville. He sought to soothe the

misgivings of the Members of Parliament on the constitutional issues at hand, while depicting Grenville as the “villain of the piece.” (Derry, 77) Following his motivating speech, a vote to repeal the Stamp Act passed the House of Commons 274 to 134.

Following the Boston Tea Party, which was one of the colonists’ reactions to Townshend Act, Parliament passed four Coercive Acts, which only spurred more revolting from the colonists. On April 19, 1774, Edmund Burke took the floor in the House of Commons. He focused on what he believed to be the “root of the problem, the history of taxation in the American colonies as it had evolved from their earliest days. Never – until the Stamp Act – had England tried to raise revenue for its own imperial purposes in America.” (Cook, 189) Unfortunately, it did not sway enough Members of Parliament. They continued passing Acts to enforce the idea that they (Britain) controlled the colonies.

Another attempt by the colonists to maintain their allegiance with England was during the First Continental Congress. They convened in Philadelphia on September 5, 1774. The first order of business was consideration of Pennsylvania Loyalist Joseph Galloway's Plan of Union, which urged creation of an American parliament to act in concert with the existing British body. Galloway was attempting to create an American colonial parliament that would work with the Parliament in Britain. The Colonial Parliament would consist of a President-General appointed by the Crown, and delegates appointed by the colonial assemblies. Galloway's plan would have kept the British Empire together, while allowing the colonies to have some say over their own affairs, including the inflammatory issue of taxation. Galloway’s plan missed narrowly (5 votes to 6) – colonial representatives opted for the Suffolk Resolves (a plan which involved boycotting trade and was a bit more radical than Galloway’s plan).

A final attempt at a peaceful resolve from the colonists was the Olive Branch Petition in 1775. The Second Continental Congress made one more attempt to end the fighting with Britain. John Dickinson, from Pennsylvania, was the primary author of the document. This appeal was directed to King George himself. It restated their concern about the British policies and asked the king to halt the war. They also asked him to repeal the Coercive Acts and bring about reconciliation. While critical of Parliament and the king's ministers, the petition lauded the relationship between the American colonies and the mother country as “the wonder and envy of other nations.” It never denounced their loyalty to the king – just to the acts/taxes/policies passed affecting the colonies. Congress approved the statement on July 5, and then 48 delegates signed it. In mid-August, Richard Penn arrived at Lord Dartmouth’s office to deliver the petition, but discovered he had “gone to the country for a rest.” (Cook, 230) In Dartmouth’s absence, the government decided to ignore the petition on “the grounds that the Crown did not recognize the Continental Congress.” (Cook, 230) Instead, they issued a Proclamation of Rebellion on August 23, 1775, which put Britain and the colonies into an official state of war.

So, were there efforts made to avoid an armed conflict between Britain and the colonies? Yes, there were multiple attempts, from both the colonists and Members of Parliament. While England does not view the loss of the colonies in America as a significant moment in British history, they certainly look at the means by which the colonies were lost as turning point in their history. Six months after the battle of Yorktown, Charles James Fox (Member of Parliament) pronounced, “There is one grand domestic evil from which all other evils, foreign and domestic, have sprung: The influence of the Crown. To the influence of the Crown, we must attribute the loss of the army in Virginia. To the influence of the Crown, we must attribute the loss of the thirteen provinces in America; for it was the influence of the Crown in the two Houses of Parliament that enabled His majesty’s ministers to preserve against the voice of reason, the voice of truth, and the voice of the people.” (Cook, 17)

## **Annotated Bibliography**

- Bemis, Samuel Flagg. *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*. (Greenwood, 1983). Alderman E249.B44 1983  
This book doesn't necessarily provide specific information regarding the question I've asked, but rather gives background information on the diplomacy of the American Revolution. It provides insight about other countries that affected the Revolution bringing about America's role on the world stage.
- Cook, Don. *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies, 1760-1785*. (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995). Alderman E210.C665 1995  
This book explains how the British could have perhaps prevented war. It highlights relevant British figures who attempted to maintain peace with the colonies. It provides perspective about how different King George II and King George III were, and how the British dealt with it.
- Derry, John. *English Politics and the American Revolution*. (Aldine Press, 1976). Alderman E:210.D4  
This book is a condensed version of other texts that focus on British controversy during the Revolutionary War. It doesn't have a lot of full text speeches, or vivid descriptions but gives the big picture ideas. It would be a good starting point for gathering information about the topic.
- Franklin, Benjamin. "Albany Plan of Union." Reproduced in History Resource Center. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/HistRC/> \*\*  
This online copy of the Albany Plan of Union, 1754, found through the History Resource Center, shows the efforts toward peace Benjamin Franklin was making. It emphasizes the desire of the colonies to maintain their alliance with Britain. It is a useful document not only to show efforts of peace, but also to show that not everyone wanted independence yet.
- Franklin, Benjamin. "Letter to Joseph Galloway, February 25, 1775." Reproduced in History Resource Center. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/HistRC/> \*\*  
This online article, found through the History Resource Center, shows the ongoing communication between Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Galloway. Both men presented a peaceful union between the colonies and Britain which didn't get the attention of Parliament.
- Galloway, Joseph. "Galloway's Plan of Union." Reproduced in History Resource Center. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/HistRC/> \*\*  
This online copy of Joseph Galloway's Plan of Union provides proof of another measure toward peace. It again emphasizes the desire to belong to the British Empire but offers additional solutions for colonial representation.
- Hibbert, Christopher. *Redcoats and Rebels – The American Revolution Through British Eyes*. (W.W. Norton & Company, 1990). Clemons E230.H52 1990  
Written by a British professor, this book provides a fresh take on the Revolution and helps us understand decisions made by the British before and during the Revolution.
- Morgan, Edmund. *Benjamin Franklin* (Yale, 2002), Alderman E 302.6 .F8 M86 2002  
Chapters 5 and 6 in this book focus on Benjamin Franklin's role in the years prior to the American Revolution. It gives specific information about his role in London acting as a go between for the colonies and Parliament. It also provides an alternative view point about Benjamin Franklin's role during the revolutionary time.

"Olive Branch Petition." *Dictionary of American History*. Stanley I. Kutler, ed. 3rd ed. 10 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. Reproduced in History Resource Center. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale.  
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/HistRC/> \*\*

The History Resource Center provides a description of the Olive Branch Petition. It also shows attempts toward peace, but maintaining their relationship with the King. Students will see again that not everyone was ready to break completely from the mother country.

Weintraub, Stanley. *Iron Tears, America's Battle for Freedom, Britain's Quagmire: 1775-1783*. (Free Press, 2005). Clemons E249.3 W45 2005

This well-regarded book presents the British perspective on the American Revolution. It is organized chronologically, so you can easily find British reactions to particular events you're interested in.

Various Authors. *A Companion to the American Revolution*. (Blackwell, 2000). Alderman. E208.C67 2000

Specific chapters to look at are 28, 29, 30 and 44. Provides additional background information about what was happening in the Colonies and England during the pre-Revolution time period.

\*\* These illustrations and articles were located through the History Resource Center, an online database that can only be accessed at participating Universities and Institutes of Higher Learning (such as UVA). You will have to use a library computer onsite to access them.