

*Were All the Grievances in the Declaration of Independence
Justified?*

As Americans, we learn history through a very narrow lens. We are taught that we, founders of self government and equality for all, got to that point of self-declared independence through injustice at the hands of the British, the tyrannical empire whose only care was money and power. If instead teachers taught students to see history from more than one perspective, we have the opportunity to not only show the fault in taking one side's view as fact, but also the value of seeing history as a puzzle students must put together and make sense of themselves rather than relying on textbook writers to do it for them. What if we taught students to look at the events leading up to the writing of the Declaration of Independence not only through the eyes of the patriots, but also through the eyes of the British and ask themselves, were all the grievances in the Declaration of Independence justified, or did the British act within their every right and within reason?

In 1776 relations between the American colonists and the British Government had reached a boiling point, which culminated in the writing of the Declaration of Independence, a document that declared all ties severed between the colonists and the British Empire. At this point in history, to many in the American colonies, it seemed that the British were doing nothing but holding them back. They had limited their dreams of westward expansion with the Proclamation of 1763, they had levied taxes without the colonists' input with the Stamp Act and other Intolerable Acts, and had stationed a standing army in the colonies (gliderlehrman.org), which the colonists had the obligation to welcome into their homes and pay their salaries. After failing to influence England through petitioning and boycotting, the colonists felt their only option was a war for independence, something that in their minds was fully justified, if not inevitable.

The root of the problem from the British perspective, however, is somewhat different. " The issues that came to define the revolutionary crisis were immediate results of the Seven Years War and of changing expectations on both sides of the Atlantic." (Bender 81) Because the colonists benefited from the Seven Years War and the territories that

the war had secured, "it seemed only right that at least part of the cost of maintaining a force in the American colonies should be met by the colonists themselves." (Cook xviii) This was the British rationalization for imposing taxes. At the time, the American colonies enjoyed paying the lowest taxes in the world, "six pence a year against the average English taxpayer's twenty five shillings." (Cook xviii). After the British established these taxes, the colonists resorted to violence and propaganda in which a minority of patriots influenced other colonists into believing there was a problem with English government, when, in actuality, the British had a point. The victory of the Seven Years War "had established Britain as the world's leading colonial power and had left her with vastly increased territories to administer," (Hibbert 6) and protect in North America This was an expensive endeavor.

Propaganda by the hands of the patriots was another powerful tool in convincing the colonists of the "evils" of England, evils that might not have been warranted. On March 5, 1770, some colonists were attacking British tax collectors. British redcoats were called in for protection and were met with insults and snowballs. The greatly outnumbered redcoats shot into the crowd killing 5 and wounding 6 others. A painting by Paul Revere depicts the story in quite a different light. It shows the British firing into a crowd of unsuspecting colonists, and conspicuously leaves out the colonists' taunts and jeers, simply focusing on a British commander ordering the "massacre" of many patriots. It was this patriot "Sons of Liberty" propaganda that named the event a massacre, a clear manipulation of words trying to stir up angry feelings towards the British Government. These Sons of Liberty, or Sons of Violence as their victims called them, "organized attacks on stamp distributors and royal officials, tarring and feathering them [to the point where] it became unsafe in certain places 'for a man to even speak a word for the king'..." (Hibbert 9) This information is rarely included in American history books, replaced with accounts of unfair and overbearing treatment at the hands of the British and their supporters.

By looking at specific events that led to the writing of the Declaration of Independence only through the eyes of the patriots and only through our American history

textbooks, we are missing a great opportunity to teach something even more important, to question, to always want more information. We owe it to our students to teach them to seek the truth while studying history. This exploration will develop a love for history that has diminished over the years. While some of the patriots' complaints may have been well founded, as our history books and other patriot sources support, to neglect British sources would be neglecting much of what makes us American and all that makes history what it is.

Annotated list of supplemental resources

Secondary Sources:

Cook, Don (1995). *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.

Summary: This book discusses the American Revolution and the events leading up to it from the British perspective. Among the topics it discusses are the Intolerable Acts, the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party, all of which are helpful when studying the American Revolution because it gives the reader a larger picture; a more thorough context. The author also uses many primary sources such as personal letters to illustrate his points.

Hibbert, Christopher (1990). *Redcoats and Rebels*. WW Norton & Company Inc.

Summary: This book discusses the history of the American Revolution from the British perspective, from the colonists' uproar over the Stamp Act of 1765 to the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Seeing things through the British eyes deepens the readers' understanding of the obstacles and hardships Britain faced at the time in an attempt to keep control over the American Colonies. This book illustrates the steps leading up to the writing of the Declaration of Independence including some origins of the grievances Jefferson listed in the document.

Rakove, Jack (2009). *The Annotated U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Summary: This book provides a narrative account of how these documents were written. He establishes a historical context for each of the grievances listed. This historical context, in user-friendly wording, can help students "decode" their grievance to make sure they know what it is actually saying before they get started on whether or not it was justified. For the teacher, the book supplies great background information that can in turn enrich our teaching of the subject.

Bender, Thomas (2006). *A Nation Among Nations: America's place in World History*.

New York: Hill and Wang.

Summary: In this book, Thomas Bender gives an invaluable look at American History from a world history context. This book can help teachers widen their historical thinking and thus, their teaching.

"Principles of Freedom: The Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution."

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. 2005.

<http://research.history.org/pf/declaring/>

Summary: This website is a wonderful resource for background information on the events leading up to the American Revolution. It has a wonderful interactive timeline full of teacher friendly resources. This website could also be useful for students doing an extension project or for teachers in need of primary resources for a lesson or for their own knowledge.

"The Gilder Lehrman Institute Modules on American History." The Gilder Lehrman

Institute. 2009.

http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/module1/intro_page9.html.

Summary: This series for teachers and students gives an in-depth look at specific topics throughout American history. It includes documents, films, and historic pictures useful for teachers putting together a unit or background knowledge, or research for a students doing an extension project. I used the Revolutionary War module, specifically the Declaration of Independence that broke down all the grievances and justifications behind each one.

Primary Sources:

The American Declaration of Independence. Jefferson, Thomas, c. 1776. Charters of Freedom Division, National Archives. Retrieved from

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

Summary: Drafted by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, the Declaration of Independence summarized the philosophy of individual liberty and brought forth grievances against the King in order to justify breaking away from England and setting forth being their own country. Students will have the opportunity, by examining this document, to draw their own conclusions regarding the justification of the American Colonies breaking ties with England.