



CLASSROOM MATERIALS

The Reluctant Revolutionaries

Overview:

Typically, students see the American Revolution as an organized rebellion of a united people against an oppressive tyrannical government. In their estimation, the colonies simply rose up and gained their independence.

In actuality, the truth was far from that. Although many colonists felt they deserved the equal rights and liberties of those in the mother country, they were not ready or willing to totally break away from the British Empire and start a new nation. In essence, they were “reluctant revolutionaries” who believed they were being denied basic rights and freedoms, but were not ready to take the “big step”. Many would agree with the remark of a woman during the conclusion of Episode 1 of *Liberty!* who stated, “I pray there be some, decent, honorable way to put to an end this conflict, to be once again reconciled with old friends”.

In this lesson, students will explore what drove these reluctant colonists to become “revolutionaries.”

Related Resources for the Lesson

In this lesson, students will use the following resources:

1. Episodes 1 & 2 of *Liberty!* Teachers may elect to have their classes watch the entire length of both episodes, or may wish to “pick and choose” specific instances and portions which highlight the theme of the lesson.

Suggested segments include:

Episode 1: *The Reluctant Revolutionaries*

- a. Chapter 2 *Insignificant Provincials* (6:40-15:06)
- b. Chapter 7 *The Cockpit* (47:01-51:41)
- c. Chapter 8 *The Fleet Arrives in Boston* (51:42-53:22)

Episode 2: *Blows Must Decide*

- a. Chapter 2 *The Continental Congress Meets* (5:16-11:48)
- b. Chapter 3 *A Sense of Betrayal* (11:50-13:53)
- c. Chapter 8 *An Olive Branch* (33:02-39:00)
- d. Chapter 9 *Common Sense* (39:01-43:59)
- e. Chapter 10 *Independence* (44:00-53:35)

2. The text of *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine (links at bottom of page)
<http://www.bartleby.com/133/>
3. Question Sheet PDF (for students)
4. Question Sheet PDF (for teachers, with answers)

Relevant standards

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>)

US History:

- Understands the social, political, and religious aspects of the American Revolution (e.g., decisions leading to crisis of revolution, efforts by Parliament and colonies to prevent revolution, the ideas of different religions and the economic and social differences between Loyalists, Patriots and neutrals)
- Understands the events that contributed to the outbreak of the American Revolution and the earliest armed conflict of the Revolutionary War (e.g., opponents and defenders of England's new imperial policy, the idea of "taxation without representation" and the battle at Lexington and Concord)
- Understands the major developments and chronology of the Revolutionary War as well as the roles of its political, military and diplomatic leaders (e.g., George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Hancock and Richard Henry Lee)
- Understands how political, ideological and religious ideas joined economic interests to bring about the "shot heard round the world" (e.g., leaders of resistance to imperial policy, the English tax on the colonists to help pay for the Seven Years War and the interests and positions of different economic groups, such as northern merchants, southern rice and tobacco planters, yeoman farmers and urban artisans)
- Understands the social and economic impact of the Revolutionary War (e.g., problems of financing the war, wartime inflation, hoarding and profiteering and the personal and social economic hardships brought on by war)

Strategy for the Lesson

The teacher should begin this lesson with a viewing of the episodes (or segments) and then conduct an overview of issues and conflicts between the British and the colonists in the years leading to the Declaration of Independence. Brainstorm with the class about what these issues and conflicts might be. (Students will most likely include the ideas of "taxation without representation," higher prices paid by the colonists for goods because

of British trading policies, restrictions on manufacturing and selling colonial products because of the trade practices.) The teacher may wish to have students create a chart on the chalkboard or overhead projector, which highlights the following issues:

- Resentments/Distrusts of the British toward the colonists
- Resentments/Distrusts of the colonists toward the British
- What issues angered the colonists toward the British?
- What issues angered the British toward the colonists?
- For what reason(s) were the colonists dependent on the British?
- For what reason(s) were the British dependent on the colonists?

The teacher may also wish to divide the class into groups, asking one side to represent the British point of view and the other side to represent the colonial point of view in a discussion/debate of British policy or legislation that includes the Stamp Act or the Intolerable Acts. Students should also consider the “Loyalist” point of view. Why would some colonists feel compelled to remain allied with the British even though they lived side by side with those who felt the best course of action was to break away and form a new nation?

After the discussion and viewing, distribute the question sheets to students.

Allot sufficient time for students to answer the questions. Once students have completed the questions, the teacher should evaluate them according to the depth of answer desired, the amount of time allowed for the assignment, as well as any other criteria established by the teacher, such as spelling and grammar.

Extension Activity

Ask students to look at other revolutionary movements in world history (for example, the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution). Ask them to write reports highlighting the various factions/sides in those revolutions, the groups’ differing viewpoints and the revolution’s influence or impact. Have students explore the outcomes as well as the social upheaval of those revolutions in comparison to the impact of the American Revolution.

Question Sheet (with answers)

1. During the decade before the outbreak of war, what were the two major attitudes of the colonists toward Parliament and the British Empire?

The majority of colonists fully expected a compromise would occur. Even after Lexington and Concord, most colonists simply saw themselves as defending their rights as citizens of the British Empire. They believed in a peaceful settlement. Others believed that if the Crown could tax them without representation, then other rights might be taken away from them. They felt that, sooner or later, all free colonists would be reduced to slaves, particularly after the passage of the Intolerable Acts, and they felt compelled to fight back.

2. Why were they glad to be in the British Empire?

Possibly the best reason was that because under the benign rule of King George III, Americans were the freest, most prosperous and least taxed people on earth. They may have also seen the British government as the legitimate government of the Empire, which would protect them from harm and protect their financial investments as well.

3. Describe how colonists who were leaders of the colonial opposition to Parliament's authority might have seen themselves and/or what they believed.

They did not see themselves as "Founding Fathers" or even revolutionaries. They simply were defending their rights as citizens of the British Empire. These people more frequently saw themselves as "reluctant revolutionaries," because they wanted more to protect their rights of property as well as protect their wealth. They also were somewhat reluctant to set up a large scale democracy or a republic. They believed that democracy was synonymous with anarchy and mob rule.

4. Why would George Washington feel it more necessary to join the "other side" against the British?

Some students may note that since Washington was a landholder as well as a man of wealth, it was important to him that he seek ways to protect his livelihood and assets. Other students may note that since Washington also sought ambition, he may have felt that joining the colonial side would give him the recognition and social status he thought he deserved.

5. Is it possible to separate the American Revolution (a new way of thinking about government, where power lay in the hands of the people) from the American Revolutionary War (American's fight for independence)? Why or why not? How do the views of Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* help to separate the idea of the war from the overall Revolution?

Answers will vary. Some students will note that the *Revolution* came after the war began. In other words, the ideas that Jefferson included in the Declaration of Independence actually postdated the start of the *Revolutionary War* by more than a year. In addition, students may also note that most Americans simply wanted to maintain the rights of British citizens, which led to the war, but the idea of the Revolution was something entirely different.

6. What could have prevented the colonists' declaring independence and going to war?

Answers will vary. Most students, however, will note that if Parliament had acquiesced to the colonial notion of representation in government, colonists may have been satisfied, and the Revolutionary war might never have occurred. If the war never occurred, the Revolution may not have occurred either.

7. Why did a minority of colonists continue to move toward independence and volunteer to fight for this cause?

Answers will vary. It's possible that some felt the idea of sovereignty was more important than anything else and decided to fight for that idea.



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Question Sheet

1. During the decade before the outbreak of war, what were the two major attitudes of the colonists toward Parliament and the British Empire?
2. Why were they glad to be in the British Empire?
3. Describe how colonists who were leaders of the colonial opposition to Parliament's authority might have seen themselves and/or what they believed.
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7. Why did a minority of colonists continue to move toward independence and volunteer to fight for this cause?