



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

Parliament: Should Britain Continue the War after Yorktown?

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

TWO 45 or 50 minute class periods in a **Grade 4-8**. (There is also a one-day version of this lesson.)

PURPOSE AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

History is the chronicle of choices made by actors/agents/protagonists who, in very specific contexts, unearth opportunities and inevitably encounter impediments. During the Revolutionary War people of every stripe navigated turbulent waters. As individuals and groups struggled for their own survival, they also shaped the course of the nation. Whether a general or a private, male or female, free or enslaved, each became a player in a sweeping drama. The instructive sessions outlined here are tailored for upper elementary and middle school students, who encounter history most readily through the lives of individual historical players. Here, students actually *become* those players, confronted with tough and often heart-wrenching choices that have significant consequences. History in all its complexity comes alive. It is a convoluted, thorny business, far more so than streamlined timelines suggest, yet still accessible on a personal level to students at this level.

In this simulation, elementary or middle school students become members of the British Parliament who must decide, after the defeat at Yorktown, whether to continue the war in America. The lesson opens with a question. In 1777, Britain lost some 7,000 soldiers at Saratoga; in 1781 it lost some 8,000 at Yorktown, but it still had over 40,000 troops stationed in North America and the West Indies. Why did one defeat trigger the end of the war, while others did not? The question itself, rarely asked, leads to an expanded look at the Revolutionary War, which by 1781 had evolved into a global war. Once France, Spain, and the Netherlands had joined the war, Britain struggled to maintain its vast empire, challenged on many fronts. By looking at the war through a wider lens, students will see that Britain, a world power, was not bested by the United States alone. The David v. Goliath view of the war promulgated in most textbooks at this level gives way to a narrative that places our nation's birth in a global context—a valuable message for our time.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

* Students will be able to demonstrate that the Revolutionary War did not end with the British defeat at Yorktown.

* Students will be able to explain the military situation in North America following the British defeat at Yorktown.

- * Students will be able to list the three European powers that had joined the war against Great Britain.
 - * Students will be able to list theaters around the globe that competed with North America for Britain's military resources.
 - * Students will be able to explain why, in Great Britain, the decision whether to end or continue the war rested with Parliament.
 - * Students will be able to cite the British example as precedent for the United States Constitution, which granted powers of war and peace to Congress, not the President.
 - * Students will be able to elucidate the three options considered in Parliament following the defeat at Yorktown.
 - * Students will be able to explain that Britain ended its war against the United States in order to preserve its empire elsewhere.
- *By embracing roles as Members of Parliament, students will be better able to evaluate valuable information relevant to historical decisions, including decisions made by our nation's enemies.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A. After Yorktown

Day one—In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 10-15 minutes
2. Presentation: The British military situation in America after Yorktown: 15-20 minutes
3. Students, as members of Parliament, consider whether to keep fighting in America after the defeat at Yorktown: 10-15 minutes
4. Historical outcome: Parliament votes to continue the war: 5 minutes

Day two—in class:

1. Presentation of the global picture—defending the British Empire elsewhere: 15-20 minutes
2. Students, as members of Parliament in February, 1782, consider whether to keep fighting in America: 15-20 minutes
3. Historical outcome: Parliament votes to end the war in America: 10-15 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handout (Students read.)

A. After Yorktown

Classroom Handouts (Teacher presents or students read this material.)

- B: British Military Situation in America
- C. Expansion of the Revolutionary War around the Globe
- D. Historical Outcome: The Revolutionary War Comes to an End

Materials useful for the lesson but not provided here:

- Map of North America and the West Indies
- Globe or world map

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Distribute **Handout A: After Yorktown**. Go over instructions on that sheet. Introduce the reading with this question: *At Yorktown in 1781, almost 8,000 soldiers commanded by General Cornwallis surrendered—but four years earlier, the British General Burgoyne lost over 7,000 soldiers at Saratoga. Britain didn't give up in 1777. Did it have to give up in 1781?*

DAY ONE CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: 10-15 minutes

Review the state of affairs after Yorktown, presented in Handout A. Discuss the three options available to Britain.

Be sure to discuss the question: *Who would actually decide whether the British Army and Navy continued to fight against the Americans? Why couldn't the King decide that?*

Response: *According to British law, only Parliament could make that decision. Members of Parliament are elected by citizens, and the people must have some say if they are to sacrifice their “blood and treasure,” they said back then. (“Blood” meant that many will die in a war, and “treasure” meant that the people, through their taxes, will have to pay for the war.) The United States Constitution, following the British example, states that only Congress, not the President, can declare war.*

Students share their initial responses.

2: PRESENTATION: THE BRITISH MILITARY SITUATION IN AMERICA AFTER YORKTOWN: 15-20 minutes

Distribute **Handout B. British Military in America**. Introduce it: *Before you consider whether or not to bring British soldiers home, consider some additional information.*

With the class, go over that sheet point-by-point. Use a map to locate British forces elsewhere in America.

3. STUDENTS, AS MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, CONSIDER WHETHER TO KEEP FIGHTING IN AMERICA AFTER THE DEFEAT AT YORKTOWN: 10-15 minutes

Teacher presents: *On December 12, 1781, shortly after learning about Yorktown, some Members of Parliament (MPs) offered a motion to stop fighting the America. There had been earlier motions to leave the United States alone, but these had always been defeated by large majorities. Imagine that you are an MP now, knowing what happened in Yorktown but also knowing the strength of the British Army elsewhere in America. It is time to weigh in on the three options:*

- A. Continue fighting.
- B. Stop the war and allow the United States to be an independent nation
- C. Stop chasing after the Continental Army but keep soldiers in key ports.

Students then deliberate in breakout groups. Tell them to refer to Handout A and Handout B as they debate the issue. The idea is to keep their arguments information-based.

4. HISTORICAL OUTCOME: PARLIAMENT VOTES TO CONTINUE THE WAR: 5 minutes.

Review responses from breakout groups. Whether returns favor a British withdrawal or a continuation of the war, give the historical outcome:

*Parliament defeated the motion: 179 votes in favor of ending the war, while 220 voted to continue fighting. This was closer than previous votes, but the war was still on. In America, the fighting continued. A military historian, Howard Peckham, researched the death toll for every battle in the Revolutionary War. He found out that on the American side, more people were killed in the year **after** Yorktown than in the **first** year of the war (which had included the fighting at Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, and the attack on Quebec). Yorktown was an important battle, but it was not the **last** battle of the war.*

DAY TWO

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. PRESENTATION OF THE GLOBAL PICTURE—DEFENDING THE BRITISH EMPIRE ELSEWHERE: 15-20 minutes

Present the background:

Parliament at this time also had to deal with wars around the globe. Great Britain was the strongest country in the world, but there were other countries in Europe that competed with Britain for power. When France, Spain, and the Netherlands (sometimes called Holland) noticed that Britain was getting bogged down with a war in America, they saw an opportunity to weaken their rival.

Distribute **Handout C. Expansion of the Revolutionary War around the Globe**. Present the material in that sheet while referencing a globe or world map. Students will digest it best by a combination of listening, looking, and reading.

2. STUDENTS, AS MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT IN FEBRUARY, 1782, CONSIDER WHETHER TO KEEP FIGHTING IN AMERICA: 15-20 minutes

Instruct students to keep their written material available as they debate the issue. Also, ask them to keep looking at the map or globe as they talk. Tell them why: *British MPs had to keep the big picture in mind, the interests of the British Empire at that point in time.*

3. HISTORICAL OUTCOME—PARLIAMENT VOTES TO END THE WAR IN AMERICA: 10-15 minutes

Present the material, orally or as a reading assignment, in **Handout D. Historical Outcome: The Revolutionary War Comes to an End.** Discussion can follow, or teacher can introduce any of the topics in Extended Activities.

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Research the British loss at Saratoga. What did Britain want to accomplish in that expedition? Why did it fail? Why did Britain continue fighting afterwards? Before Saratoga, France gave some help to the Americans, but it did not fight Britain directly. Why do you think France went “all-in” for the war after Saratoga?
2. British soldiers were known as the “King’s Army,” but almost a century before the American Revolution, Parliament insisted that *it* had power to collect taxes and wage war, not the King or Queen. Research and report on the “Glorious Revolution of 1688,” when Parliament succeeded in getting the final say in taxes and war.
3. Ten days after the Cornwallis’s army surrendered at Yorktown, George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, urged Congress to “continue its preparations for military operations.” Why do you think he said that? What was he worried might happen if Congress told American soldiers they could go home? Imagine you are Washington, and write a letter to Congress explaining why it should continue to support the Continental Army.
4. Here is a [list of Revolutionary War Battles](#). Note that many of these were fought after the American victory at Yorktown. Those in the United States often involved Native Americans who were fighting to preserve their lands. Those in other places (the West Indies, Europe, India, and naval battles) were between Britain and France, Spain, the Netherlands, or colonial rebels in India. They did not involve Americans, but the war had started here in America, and the fact that Britain had to fight in these battles was a major reason that Britain decided *not* to continue fighting the United States.

- a. Research and report on one of the battles in the United States, such as the [Battle of Blue Licks](#).

OR

- b. Research and report on one of the battles that was fought in another country, such as the [Grand Assault on Gibraltar](#) (the end of the Great Siege of Gibraltar).

Vocabulary for “Parliament: Should Britain Continue the War after Yorktown?”

allegiance — loyalty to a person or a group, often to a nation or a state

amendment — an addition to a law

England or Great Britain? In 1707, England and Scotland joined together to become the nation of Great Britain.

MP — a member of Parliament

naval power — size and strength of navies

Parliament — the British law-making body, like our Congress. Many other nations also have parliaments

port — a town or city with a harbor where ships can pick up goods or unload them

prime minister — the leader of Parliament

siege/lay siege — surrounding a place to cut off supplies and force surrender

treaty — an agreement that nations make to avoid a war or to end a war

Handout A: After Yorktown

What does your textbook say about the battle of Yorktown in 1781? Most say that Great Britain just gave up after losing that battle because they realized they couldn't win the Revolutionary War. It's true that almost 8,000 British soldiers surrendered at Yorktown—but four years earlier, the British General Burgoyne lost over 7,000 soldiers at Saratoga. Britain didn't give up in 1777; in fact, it won most of its battles after that. Did Britain really *have* to give up in 1781?

Across the ocean in Britain, some people thought Britain should give up after Yorktown. When the prime minister of Parliament, Lord North, heard the news, he exclaimed: "Oh God, it's all over!" He was the main person in Parliament who had supported the war, but after Yorktown, he didn't think the British army could ever defeat the Americans.

King George III, on the other hand, said that Britain should continue to fight: "I have no doubt that when men are a little recovered of the shock felt by the bad news, they will find the necessity of carrying on the war." In any war, some battles are won and others are lost. Losing one battle did not mean the whole war was over. The King admitted that Britain might have to change its strategy, but it didn't have to quit.

Some favored a third option: Britain could stop chasing after the American army but hold onto the cities it already controlled on the coast of America: New York, Charleston, and Savannah. These ports would be valuable for British ships trading with the West Indies or Canada. Besides, the United States had a weak government and didn't have much money. It depended on France for support now, but France wouldn't support it forever. In time, the United States might just fall apart. If that happened, British troops stationed in those port cities could just take over. Why remove them now and just give up? Perhaps it was better to wait and see what the future might bring.

Who in Britain would decide what to do? The King could not decide on his own because only Parliament was allowed to raise money, by taxing the people, to support an army and navy. The decision of whether to fight or quit was up to Parliament.

In class, you will become an "MP"—that's what a Member of Parliament is called in Britain. You and your classmates will decide, based on information you are given, which of the three options to pursue.

INSTRUCTIONS: Before making your final decision, you will need, and receive, more information. So don't make up your mind just yet. For now, write one or two sentences in favor of at least two of these three options.

As you think this over, try to forget that you are an American student in the 21st Century. You live in Great Britain. It's the late 18th Century, after the 1781 Battle of Yorktown. On the one hand, the war has been going on for over six years, at great expense. Many people have already died. It might make sense to stop fighting and give the thirteen American colonies up. On the other hand, losing those colonies would be a really big deal. They send important things to your country, and they buy things that people in your country make. Also, they provide access to the huge North American continent and all the resources there. The American colonies have helped your country become the richest and most powerful nation on earth.

Handout B: British Military Situation in America

(All numbers rounded off to the nearest thousand)

A. American and French soldiers after Yorktown:

Continental Army: 8,000

French Army: 8,000

American militia: these were not regular soldiers, but they would turn out to fight for specific battles

B. British soldiers in North America and the West Indies after Yorktown:

Canada: 10,000

New York, Charleston, Savannah, and St. Augustine: 34,000

West Indies: 9,000

C. Naval power: After blocking British ships from resupplying soldiers trapped at Yorktown, the French fleet under Comte De Grasse moved to the West Indies. There, however, De Grasse was defeated by a British fleet. A few French ships remained in Newport, Rhode Island, and the Continental (American) Navy at that point had only 11 ships. Britain controlled Atlantic coast and was able to supply its soldiers in New York, Charleston, Savannah, and St. Augustine.

D. Supplies: British soldiers could get some of their food from American farms, but the rest of their food, as well as military supplies (weapons, ammunition, uniforms) had to be shipped across the Atlantic Ocean. That trip took about three or four weeks at best, and sometimes a ship would have to deal with storms or ships of enemy nations.

E. Costs: The British government had to pay soldiers, outfit ships, and purchase supplies. Parliament had to tax the people to get this money, and the people were getting tired of “footing the bill.” On the other hand, Britain was still far richer than the rebellious colonies, which had to borrow money from France, Spain, and the Netherlands.

Handout C. Expansion of the Revolutionary War around the Globe

The December 12 motion was defeated, 179 for stopping the war and 220 for continuing it. That was much closer than earlier votes had been. To understand what MPs were faced with at that time, we need to look at the larger picture.

The war that started in America had expanded since 1775. In 1778 France joined the American side, and by 1781 two other European powers—Spain and the Netherlands—had declared war on Great Britain. As MPs were deciding what to do about America, France and Spain were laying siege to 5,000 British soldiers in Gibraltar, a fort that controlled the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. Another 2,000 British soldiers were trying to hold onto Minorca, an island in the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, local people in India, which was then a British colony, had started to rebel, much like American colonists had just done. British ships and soldiers were also needed to maintain British interests in the West Indies—and as far away as the East Indies.

Closer to home, Britain was busy protecting its own country. Two years earlier, 66 French and Spanish ships carrying 10,000 men had sailed into the English Channel and threatened to attack England. That move failed because French and Spanish ships had a difficult time communicating with each other—but it scared everyone in England. To protect their country from an invasion, Britain kept 64,000 soldiers stationed in England, 6,000 in Scotland, 4,000 in Jersey and Guernsey (islands in the English Channel), 5,000 in Gibraltar, 2,000 in Minorca, 3,000 in India, and 1,000 in the East Indies.

Early in 1782, news arrived in London that the British in Minorca had just surrendered. The rebellion in India was heating up. To pay the expenses of all these wars, Parliament considered new taxes on tea, beer, salt, tobacco, soap, and public entertainment. On February 27, 1782, a leading MP, Henry Seymour Conway, attached an amendment: to save money, Britain would abandon its war with America.

Would you, as an MP, support Conway's amendment?

D. Historical Outcome: The Revolutionary War Comes to an End

Conway's motion passed, 234-215. Weeks later, Lord Rockingham replaced Lord North as Prime Minister. Rockingham had been opposing the war for years, thinking that Britain could never defeat American colonists who wanted their independence. Great Britain sent representatives to Paris, where they met with representatives from its enemies: the United States, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Britain made separate treaties with each of these. In the treaty it made with the United States, known as the Treaty of Paris, Great Britain finally admitted that its former colonies had become an independent nation—the United States of America. That had been the main point of the war. There were other points, however, that needed to be worked out:

*What were the exact boundaries of the United States, particularly its northern border with Canada, which Britain still owned?

*Who had fishing rights in the North Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Canada and Maine?

*What would happen to the property of Loyalists, Americans who left the country after siding with the British?

*Would slaves who had fled to the British be returned to their American masters?

The Treaty of Paris wasn't signed until September 3, 1783. That was 18 months after Parliament decided not to fight anymore.

In the end, while Great Britain lost its thirteen rebellious colonies, it maintained most of its empire. Although it abandoned the American ports it held in 1783, the idea of holding a port but not the main part of a country worked to Britain's advantage elsewhere. It held the city of Hong Kong, on the coast of China, long after it gave up on the rest of China. Hong Kong did not become independent from Britain until 1997. Gibraltar, which is on the coast of Spain, still claims allegiance to Britain.