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ARTICLE

The American Revolution Was Really a World War

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Abstract

Understanding the American Revolution requires moving beyond a simple "Americans vs. Britain" narrative and viewing it within a global context. The conflict was part of a larger, global war between European colonial powers, which saw alliances formed based on international strategic interests rather than just a new nation's ideals. As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary in July 2026, the question of who secured American independence from Britain is an important but complex one. Traditional narratives focus on patriots and George Washington, which is particularly misleading. The American Revolution would likely have failed without the support of a diverse coalition of nations and peoples. Its victory was fueled by assistance from French, Spanish, and other Europeans, Native Americans, and enslaved and free Black Americans. Acknowledging the financial and military contributions of European powers, the scouting, intelligence, and military power provided by members of Indigenous nations, and the manpower offered by Black Americans does not weaken the story of 1776. It strengthens it. After 250 years, it is time to learn about and embrace the whole story, with all its complexities. Doing so lends true meaning to the U.S.'s national motto: "Out of the many, one," or E Pluribus Unum.

Keywords: American independence; Continental Army; Loyalists; Black Loyalists; Black Patriots; Native American Alliance; Trans-Atlantic conflict; Kingdom of Great Britain; Kingdom of France; Kingdom of Prussia; Spanish Empire; Cuba; Tejanos; Revolutionary War finance

As the United States marks its 250th anniversary in 2026, many people are celebrating the birth of the nation in 1776. We hear stories of brave patriots, bold speeches, and George Washington's leadership. But if we want to celebrate honestly, we have to tell the whole story: the United States did not win its independence on its own.

The victory over Britain was possible not only because of the courage of the Continental Army, but also because of crucial support from European nations, Native American allies, and enslaved and free Africans. Without this diverse coalition, the Revolution may have failed, and the United States might still be part of the British Empire today.

1. Not just a colonists' war

The American Revolution began in 1775 with the famous but unidentified "shot heard round the world." At first, it looked more like a civil war than a united rebellion. The

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colonists were divided. About 15–20 percent of white colonists remained loyal to the British Crown.[1] They fought against the American patriots.

The conflict divided Native American nations (mostly Iroquois, Mohican, and Wampanoag) and African Americans (from Western and Central Africa).[2] Some chose to support Britain, believing it to be less threatening to their lands than American settlers: Britain's 1763 Proclamation had limited colonial expansion westward, which many Native nations saw as protection.[3] In 1775, Virginia's royal governor promised freedom to enslaved people who fought for the British.[4] For some, that offer represented hope.

2. Europe's crucial role

The Revolution would have failed without major help from Europe. Countries like France and Spain provided money, weapons, soldiers, and naval power. Individual military leaders from across Europe played key roles.

The French Marquis de Lafayette fought alongside the Americans and donated funds.[5] Prussian officer Baron von Steuben trained Washington's troops, turning inexperienced soldiers into a disciplined fighting force.[6] Polish nobleman Casimir Pulaski helped shape the American cavalry, while Polish engineer Tadeusz Kościuszko designed important fortifications.[7]

From Spain, General Bernardo de Gálvez and other Peninsular military leaders led campaigns with thousands of Spanish, Cuban, and Native American troops against British forts along the Gulf Coast, capturing Baton Rouge, Mobile, and Pensacola. His victories forced Britain to send troops away from the main battlefield in the thirteen colonies.[8]

Spain also sent critical funding. When American forces prepared for the final siege at Yorktown in 1781, Spanish officials raised over 500,000 silver pesos in just 24 hours thanks to the *Damas de la Habana*, "Ladies of Havana," the wives, sisters, and mothers of the Spanish military elite in Havana who donated their jewelry to support General Washington, the cause, and a victory at Yorktown.[9]

France's financial support was substantial, about 1.3 billion *livres* in loans and supplies. At the Battle of Saratoga, around 90 percent of American soldiers used French muskets and gunpowder. Without French weapons, the Continental Army would have run out of bullets. The Revolution had become a global war.

3. The power of the French and Spanish

The final victory at Yorktown in 1781 shows how important foreign support was. Nearly half the soldiers surrounding British General Charles Cornwallis were Frenchmen led by Comte

[1] Chopra 2013.
[2] Kiro 2009, 3.
[3] Humphreys 1934.
[4] Schmidt 2014.
[5] Lane 2003.
[6] Bartel 1976.
[7] Pula 1998, 125–65, 147–66.
[8] Saravia 2018.
[9] Lewis 1980.

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de Rochambeau.[10] The French Navy, under Admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse, blocked British ships at the Battle of Chesapeake.[11] Trapped by land and sea, the British were forced to surrender. Without that naval blockade, Yorktown might not have been a decisive victory. The war could have dragged on for years.

At Pensacola and Mobile, American victories came thanks to Spanish General Bernardo de Gálvez, Admiral Luis de Córdova, General Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, and their troops, approximately 4,000 Cuban, Spanish, and French soldiers who blockaded West Florida to prevent supplies from getting to the British. These troops went on to Baton Rouge, Natchez, and even the Bahamas to fight in naval battles with Patriot forces in Virginia and Georgia.[12] Even Spanish-speaking settlers of New Spain, known as *Tejanos*, "Texans," helped Spain defeat British forces in the Gulf region by driving cattle to embattled areas to feed troops, manage supply lines, and secure frontiers.[13]

4. Indigenous allies

The Oneida and Tuscarora nations were among the most important Indigenous allies of the Continental Army.[14] Native scouts shared detailed knowledge of forests, rivers, and battle routes. They intercepted messages, gathered intelligence, and helped feed hungry troops. Some individuals stand out, their names preserved in a payroll ledger. Louis Cook, also known as Akiatonharónkwen, was Afro-Indigenous and became one of the highest-ranking officers of African and Native descent in the Continental forces.[15] Jehoiaikim Mtohksin and Abraham Nimham, both of the Mohican-Munsee Stockbridge tribe, established their own, entirely Native American military unit, the first of its kind to fight alongside the Patriots.[16] Although we know only a few names, hundreds, possibly thousands of Native Americans contributed to the war effort.

5. Black Americans and the fight for freedom

The war for independence depended heavily on Black Americans—both free and enslaved. At first, George Washington and other officers did not want Black men to enlist.[17] As the war continued and the army desperately needed soldiers, Black Americans were permitted to serve, especially in integrated, northern regiments.

Historians estimate that at least 9,000 Black soldiers served in the Continental Army or state militias.[18] In fact, about one-fifth of the northern army was Black, 5,000 of them combat-ready.[19]

Only a few names survive. Cato Smith and Prince Dunsick, both enslaved, served in a Massachusetts regiment, one of them at Saratoga and Monmouth.[20] Salem Poor was praised

[10] Vail 2011.
[11] de Grasse 1864.
[12] Paquette and Quintero Saravia 2019.
[13] See Barnes 2021.
[14] Calloway 2018.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Frazier 1994, 225.
[17] Morgan 2000.
[18] Nalty 1989.
[19] Lanning 2005; Nell 1986.
[20] Ibid.

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for his bravery at the Battle of Bunker Hill.[21] Others, like Peter Salem, Prince Eastabrook, Barzillai Lew, Alexander Ames, Seymour Burr, Titus Coburn, and Jack Peterson, fought in key battles.[22]

Many enslaved men were promised freedom in exchange for service, some by their owners, whose place they took on the battlefield.[23] The courage these men displayed in helping secure independence was on behalf of a nation that did not yet recognize their full rights. Slaveowners did not always keep their promises.[24]

6. Jewish revolutionaries

Haym Salomon, a Polish-born Jew, came to be known as both a spy and a financial hero after being sent for by Washington and raising for him the equivalent of $20,000 today just for the Yorktown campaign. In total, he raised a total of $650,000 in three years for the war.[25] Mordechai Sheftall served as Commissary General for the Continental Army and spent his own money to support the war.[26] Rabbi Gershom Mendes Seixas supported the Patriots and was the sole Jewish emissary at Washington's inauguration as the first president of the United States of America.[27]

7. A global, diverse revolution

As America celebrates the 250th anniversary of the independence of the 13 American colonies and the creation of the United States, it behooves us to remember and honor the nationally, ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse nature of the many of the people who made this independence possible, not just independence-minded colonists: many Europeans, here and abroad, who contributed much more than just funds: Native peoples whose existence and way of life were being forever altered and threatened; Africans, enslaved and free, whose arrival was forced, and whose presence was exploited and disparaged; and Jews, a small, not always welcomed religious minority who saw fit to support and defend the cause, many with their lives.

The Declaration of Independence states that "all men are created equal." Yet the fight for independence depended on people who were denied equality—enslaved Africans, displaced Native nations, and foreign allies who never would or could become American citizens. Not for a long time, at least.

The Revolution was not just Washington's war. It was a victory fueled by many. Recognizing their contributions does not weaken the story of 1776. It strengthens it. History tells us so. Acknowledging this lends true meaning to the 1782 Great Seal of the United States' motto: *E Pluribus Unum*, "Out of the many, one."

In a letter to Washington, Spanish General Louis De Unzaga coined a name for the newly formed nation, *General de los Estados Unidos Americanos.*[28] Washington, in turn, flattered by

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Morgan 2013.
[24] Lanning 2005, 58.
[25] Salomon Baron 1929.
[26] Rosenberg 2022.
[27] Phillips 1904, 43.
[28] See George Washington to Colonel Joseph Reed 1776.

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what he read, suggested the name in a letter to General Reed, a proposal the newly independent country quickly adopted and adapted in English—The United States of America.[29]

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[29] Ibid.

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