CHAPTER 10

A Common Struggle

The event we call the American Revolution wasn't really revolutionary, at least while it was underway. The military struggle of 1775–1782 wasn't fought by an "American people" seeking to create a united, continent-spanning republic where all men were created equal and guaranteed freedom of speech, religion, and the press. On the contrary, it was a profoundly conservative action fought by a loose military alliance of nations, each of which was most concerned with preserving or reasserting control of its respective culture, character, and power structure. The rebelling nations certainly didn't wish to be bonded together into a single republic. They were joined in a temporary partnership against a common threat: the British establishment's ham-fisted attempt to assimilate them into a homogeneous empire centrally controlled from London. Some nations—the Midlands, New Netherland, and New France—didn't rebel at all. Those that did weren't fighting a revolution; they were fighting separate wars of colonial liberation.

As we've already seen, the four nations that did rebel—Yankeedom, Tidewater, Greater Appalachia, and the Deep South—had little in common and strongly distrusted one another. So how did they overcome their differences to fight a war together? The answer is with great difficulty. In fact, they sometimes weren't even fighting on the same side, as Appalachia was engaged in a struggle of liberation not against Britain but against the Midlands, Tidewater, and the Deep South. To complicate matters, the elites of the Deep South were ambivalent about the revolt, with many of them changing sides in the course of it. (Georgia even rejoined the empire during the conflict.) The main reason the Deep Southerners joined the "revolution" at all was because they feared they would otherwise lose control of their slaves. The nations on the whole cooperated with one another only because they saw no other way to overcome an existential threat to their respective cultures. They allied themselves with the

enemies of their enemy but had little intention of merging with one another.

The American rebellion was precipitated by the Seven Years' War, a massive global military conflict between Britain and France that lasted from 1756 to 1763. It's remembered in the United States as the French and Indian War, because here the British fought against New France and its aboriginal allies. The war effected a major change in the North American balance of power. In the end, the French were defeated, and all of New France (save the tiny islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon) was handed over to the British Empire. This had two consequences for the people of the continent. First, it removed from the political and military stage the only European society on which Native North Americans could rely. Second, it fostered arrogant triumphalism within the British establishment, which believed it could now remake its North American empire in whatever way it saw fit. These developments played out badly for Indians and British imperialists alike.

When the oldest American nations were founded in the seventeenth century, England was still a minor power grasping at the territorial scraps the Spanish Empire had left behind. Riven by internal disagreements—the English Civil War, Cromwell's dictatorship, the Glorious Revolution—England had outsourced much of the responsibility for creating overseas colonies to private companies, wealthy aristocrats, and religious sects thought safer to observe from afar. This inattention allowed the earliest distinct cultures of Anglo-America to form and develop. By the 1680s, when the Crown tried to impose uniformity and centralization of power, it was already too late to easily do so. Some of the nations were by then several generations old and had traditions, values, and interests of their own.

So what had changed in England to bring about this shift from benignly neglecting the colonies to trying to control them? The answer: the formation of an aggressive new elite.

By the mid-eighteenth century, England had become far more powerful than it had ever been. It had absorbed Scotland, Ireland, and Wales to become the United Kingdom, a truly great Britain with an empire that spanned the globe from the muggy lowlands of India to the frigid wastes

of Hudson's Bay. In the decades since the Puritans, Quakers, Cavaliers, and Barbadians first left England, a new social force had taken shape to run this expanding empire: an arrogant ruling class. It even had its own "upper-class" accent, created in the early eighteenth century and regarded (by colonials and the English lower classes alike) as artificial and pretentious. Its members married one another almost exclusively. It founded new elite boarding schools like Eton, Westminster, and Harrow to educate and assimilate its children into its ways. It created powerful new institutions like the Bank of England, the modern Royal Navy, and the East India Company, through which it could control lesser mortals at home and abroad. In the early 1600s England was ruled by aristocrats who had been raised and tutored on their family manors or in their regional shire towns and had provincial identities, accents, and agendas. By 1763 the British ruling class was made up of men who had been educated among their elite peers in centralized patrician boarding schools and who thought of themselves as members of an imperial elite. In the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, they sought to do what King James II had failed to do eighty years earlier: subjugate the American colonies to their will, institutions, bureaucracy, and religion.[1]

Their standardization campaign advanced on many fronts simultaneously. Since the average American colonist's tax burden was just one-twenty-sixth that of his British counterpart, London imposed a vast range of new colonial duties on everything from sugar and tobacco to paper products. Some of the taxes were designed to effect social change; new fees for the issuance of university diplomas and licenses to practice law were higher than those in Great Britain "to keep mean [lowborn] persons out of those institutions in life which they disgrace." This desire to prevent the uncouth from assuming positions of influence also led the London elite to revoke the charter for one of Appalachia's first colleges, the Presbyterian-run Queens College in North Carolina, on the grounds that it would "add encouragement to toleration" of an undesirable religion. In an effort to enhance the strength of the empire's official, tax-sponsored Anglican Church, Presbyterian clergy were banned from solemnizing marriages, Anglican bishops were to be dispatched to America for the first time (horrifying the previously independent Virginia Anglicans), and Anglican missionaries were sent to Boston to convert the "heathen" Puritans there.

Although Britain was deeply in debt from the Seven Years' War, much of the new tax revenue was spent to maintain 10,000 imperial troops in North America whose "main purpose," in the words of a senior British official, was "to secure the dependence of the colonies on Great Britain." This large standing army—unprecedented in America—was charged with enforcing imperial laws, including a 1763 proclamation that banned the colonists from usurping the Indian lands on the other side of the Appalachians. Meanwhile, the Royal Navy stepped up enforcement of trade laws that blocked Yankee merchants from trading with French and Dutch territories in the Caribbean. Smugglers—and there were many—were tried in new military courts that did not provide for jury trials. The East India Company, a favored corporation controlled by the British ruling class, was given special permission to bypass trade laws and colonial merchants to ship and sell tea directly to North America. That these taxes, laws, and occupation forces were imposed on British North America without the consent of each colony's elite or elected representatives made many colonials rightly fear their distinct regional cultures were slated for extinction.[2]

The Native Americans who inhabited what had been New France also feared for their cultural survival. For a century and a half, Indians and New French had enjoyed a mutually satisfactory relationship cemented by gift-exchange ceremonies. But the British military commander, Baron Jeffrey Amherst, canceled all gift-giving and made it clear the savages were to obey or be slaughtered. The result was a massive, coordinated 1763 uprising of a dozen major tribes under the Ottawa tribal leader Pontiac aimed at hurting the British and restoring French control of New France. This war—the one that led the Paxton Boys to march on Philadelphia—resulted in Indians killing or capturing 2,000 colonists in the Appalachian sections of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Baron Amherst, seeking to "Extirpate this Execrable Race," instructed his troops to distribute smallpox-infested blankets to the Indians. Ultimately even biological warfare was unable to bring them to heel, and Amherst was recalled in disgrace.[3] "We tell you now: the French never conquered us, neither did they purchase a foot of our country," Pontiac told Amherst's successor. "If you expect to keep these [Great Lakes region trading] posts, we will expect to have proper returns from you." After making peace, it was all the more

important to British imperial officials that the colonists be kept in line and out of the Indians' land beyond the Appalachians.[4]

Once again, Yankeedom was first to rebel.

The nation with the greatest religious and ethnic cohesion, national self-awareness, and commitment to self-governance, Yankees were willing to fight and die to preserve "the New England Way." Some of them saw the struggle as a sequel to the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution, with good Calvinists fighting the forces of despotism and Popery, this time in the form of a grasping monarch and the "Catholic Lite" Anglican Church with its bishops and idols. From eastern Maine to southern Connecticut, the Puritan churches—now termed Congregationalist—lined up on the patriot side, urging their members to resist. The Puritan notion that self-denial is virtuous was applied in the form of consumer boycotts of British luxury and manufactured goods. As a Rhode Island newspaper put it, citizens must "forsake the use of one of their delights to preserve their liberty." As one Revolutionary War veteran would later explain: "What we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: we always had governed ourselves and we always meant to. They didn't mean that we should."[5]

In December 1773 an organized mob threw £11,000 worth of East India Company tea into Boston Harbor. The British Parliament responded by revoking Massachusetts's governing charter, blockading the port of Boston, and imposing martial law. General Thomas Gage, Amherst's replacement as military commander for North America, was named governor and authorized to house his troops in private homes should he see fit.

This draconian response alarmed the leaders of all the British-controlled nations, prompting them to call a diplomatic meeting among themselves—the First Continental Congress, which convened in September 1774. Meanwhile, each nation reacted in its own way to the developments in New England.

The Yankees' response was culturally revealing: Massachusetts's rebel leaders promptly announced a new representative assembly—the Provincial Congress—and asked all towns to hold elections to fill its seats. By early 1775 the 200 elected delegates had become the de facto government

of the colony, collecting taxes and organizing revolutionary militia forces. Even in a time of crisis, Yankees had acted on a community basis, implementing critical decisions at the ballot box and directing their military response through a representative government. New Englanders were so united in their resistance that General Gage's imperial government ceased to function outside of Boston and only existed there because thousands of red-coated British regulars controlled the streets. Impotent and outnumbered, Gage wrote to London asking for 20,000 more soldiers, as many as had been deployed against New France in the Seven Years' War. Open conflict was inevitable.[6]

The aristocratic gentlemen who controlled Tidewater were not nearly as unified and saw no need to gauge public opinion. Like the Yankees, they opposed the new imperial policies, but were divided as to whether to go so far as to contemplate treasonous acts. As usual, the Chesapeake gentry were primarily motivated by the threat the empire posed to their own privileges or "liberties." For generations they had enjoyed near-total control over the politics, courts, and vestries of lowland Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, and their influence was spreading in Delaware. They felt themselves to be the equals of the country gentlemen of Britain, to whom many were related, and they were insulted by the idea that English liberties stopped at the shores of England. The arrival of British-appointed bishops intruded on their dominance of parish affairs. The new imperial taxes reduced their plantations' profitability. But in Virginia the Tidewater gentry were divided into two regional camps. Those gentlemen living in the Piedmont—Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Mason, and George Washington—had more regular contact with the Appalachian backcountry and a greater awareness of the enormous potential of the lands beyond the mountains, of which Virginia claimed a wide ribbon running all the way to the Pacific. Confident their society could stand on its own, they spearheaded resistance to Britain, applauded the Boston Tea Party, and refused to pay debts to British creditors. But gentlemen from the core Tidewater settlements south of the Rappahannock River were far more cautious, opposing efforts to create a provincial militia and condemning the Tea Party as an attack on private property. They were outvoted in the House of Burgesses, however, as their colony included a large swath of Appalachia, whose representatives were eager to throw off

British restraints on the settlement of what would become Kentucky and Tennessee. But the social cohesion among the gentry was such that even the losers took things in stride; ultimately very few members of the Tidewater elite were willing to fight either for the empire or against their Chesapeake countrymen. As for white commoners in the lowlands, they pretty much did as they were told.[7]

This was not, unsurprisingly, the case in Greater Appalachia. These sprawling borderlands contained the most fervent and committed champions of *both* the patriot and loyalist causes. Each local area chose sides based on whom they saw as the biggest threat to their natural freedoms: the colonial elite on the coast or the British elite across the Atlantic. In Pennsylvania the Borderlanders wanted any excuse to march down to Philadelphia and topple the soft, Madeira-sipping elite there, perhaps putting an end to the Midlands as a separate culture; this made them enthusiastic patriots. In Maryland and Virginia, backcountry folk saw the British as their greatest enemy and threw their lot in with the Piedmont faction of Tidewater aristocrats. Farther south, however, the Borderlanders most hated the great lowland planters and saw the troubles with Britain as an opportunity to throw off their masters and settle old scores. Nowhere was this hatred as great as in North Carolina, where just a few years earlier the Tidewater elite had enthusiastically crushed the Regulator army. The Appalachian people were divided, but whatever side they fought for, their goal was the same: to vanquish their oppressors.[8]

The Midlands wanted nothing to do with a revolution and, in fact, were quite happy with London's centralization effort. Their leaders did their best to stay out of the conflict altogether. Religious pacifism played a key role, particularly among the Amish, Mennonites, and Moravians who'd fled the horrors of war in Germany. Most Germans, wanting to be left alone and content with the status quo, saw no advantage in leaving the empire, which would likely give greater power to their unpleasant Scots-Irish and Tidewater neighbors. Quakers, who still had considerable influence over Midlands affairs, had little complaint with the monarchy, which had granted William Penn the charter that made their colony possible. Tolerant of other religions, they had no qualms about the increased influence of the Anglican Church, which many of their own sons and grandsons were joining. The promise of greater imperial control over the

Midlands would spare them from having to take up arms in its defense, as some had been compelled to do when the Paxton Boys marched on Philadelphia a few years before. It would also protect them from their real enemies, the bigoted Yankees and, especially, the belligerent, expansive Borderlanders, who now formed a majority of Pennsylvania's population. As the revolution approached, Quakers declared their neutrality but carried on their business with the empire. The Midlands—southeastern Pennsylvania, western New Jersey, and the northern parts of Maryland and Delaware—would be passively loyalist throughout the conflict, frustrating transplanted Philadelphians who supported the patriot cause. "The principles of Quakerism," fumed the British-born ex-Quaker Thomas Paine, "have a direct tendency to make a man the quiet and inoffensive subject of any and every government which is set over him."[9]

New Netherland was the loyalists' greatest stronghold on the continent. In the Dutch settlement area—the three counties that now comprise Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island plus the Bronx, southern Westchester, and Manhattan—public opinion was overwhelmingly against resisting the empire. Both the Dutch and the British imperial elite who governed the province feared a revolution would cause themselves to be toppled from power and that much of New York would fall under Yankee control. Indeed, large swaths already were. Areas settled by Yankees—eastern Long Island, northern Westchester, rural Albany County, and the seven northeastern counties in the Green Mountains (*Verts monts*, the New French called them)—had followed the rest of Yankeedom into open rebellion. If the colonies revolted, everyone knew the province would descend into civil war and could very well be dismembered.[10]

British officials had grounds to hope the slave lords of the Deep South would also remain loyal. The great planters were mostly Anglican, hostile to democratic ideas, and entirely dependent on the export of sugar and cotton for their livelihoods. Like the Tidewater gentry, they identified themselves as Normans or Cavaliers, with all those terms' Royalist overtones, and ran the lowlands of South Carolina, Georgia, and southernmost North Carolina as they pleased. Unlike their Chesapeake cousins, they were outnumbered by their slaves three to one and greatly feared any disruption that might give their property an opportunity to revolt. There was no talk of rebelling against the crown among their counterparts in the British West Indies, where British power was the best guarantee of internal and external security. But Deep Southern planters didn't live on an island and therefore had more room to maneuver. While they did express their disapproval of imperial efforts to increase their taxes and limit their authority, their protests were balanced against the need to keep what they called their "domestic enemies" in bondage. Planter Henry Laurens summed up the great planters' position in a letter to a friend in January 1775: they sought only "reasonable liberty" within the empire; "Independence is not [a] view of America . . . a sober sensible man wishes for."[11]

Accordingly, the slave lords acted through their provincial assemblies to support boycotts of British goods and sat back expecting London to relent. "A bloodless self-denying opposition was all that South Carolina designed, and was all the sacrifice which, as she supposed, would be required at her hands," a Charleston physician recalled of the sentiments there in early 1775. While the planters' own goal was extremely conservative—to avoid any change in the status quo—plenty of people in the colonies they controlled felt differently. In the backcountry, Borderlanders were eager to break the planters' monopoly on power and would be happy to take whatever side allowed them to do so. And in the lowlands, planters shuddered as rumors began circulating among their slaves "that the present contest [with Britain] was [about] obliging us to give them liberty." The planters prayed the other nations wouldn't pull the continent into open warfare, for they knew their tyrannical system might not withstand a major shock. The "great part of our weakness," a militia officer reported, "consists in having such a number of slaves among us."[12]

The First Continental Congress, held in Philadelphia in early September 1774, was the first time the leaders of the nations came together to coordinate policy across the colonies. The fifty-six delegates all knew that forging colonial collaboration wasn't going to be easy, not least because of negative stereotypes associated with one another's regional cultures. New Englanders were distrusted by the elites of New Netherland, Tidewater, and the Deep South for their commitment to equality. John Livingston, a delegate from New York City, left John Adams of Massachusetts with the impression that he "dread[ed] New England, the leveling spirit, etc." Quakers had not forgotten how their ancestors had been tortured and

executed by the Puritans. Many others feared the Yankees were scheming to seize control of all of British North America. "Boston aims at nothing less than the sovereignty of the whole continent, I know it," a South Carolina planter told Adams's cousin, Josiah Quincy Jr., at a 1773 dinner party. "There is a certain degree of jealousy in the minds of some that we aim at total independency," Sam Adams reported, ". . . and that as we are a hardy and brave people we shall in time rule over them all." Quincy, for his part, found on a visit to the Deep South that the "luxury, dissipation, life, sentiments and manners of the leading people [made] them neglect, despise, and be careless of the true interests of mankind in general."[13]

Adams would famously recall that the subsequent rebellion expressed "principles as various as the thirteen states that went through with it." They "had grown up under [different] constitutions of government," their "manners, and habits had so little resemblance . . . their intercourse had been so rare and their knowledge of each other so imperfect that to unite them in the same principles and the same system of action was certainly a very difficult enterprise." But while the differences Adams described were real, there weren't thirteen varieties represented in the revolution; there were six, and they didn't correspond to colonial borders.[14]

Throughout the proceedings, representatives of the four New England colonies moved in lockstep with one another, backed by the delegates from Yankee-settled Suffolk County, Long Island, and Orange County, New York. Having been the ones to call the conference, they pushed for the other delegations to agree to a full embargo of British goods and an immediate complete ban on exports to Britain as well. The Yankees also wanted the other colonies to refuse to pay British taxes and to establish their own militia forces and provisional governments.[15]

The Yankees' greatest allies were the representatives from the Piedmont section of Tidewater: Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry, and George Washington of Virginia and Thomas Johnson of Maryland. Confident in their ability to rule independent states, they aligned with the Yankees and convinced their more moderate "old Tidewater" colleagues to join them.

The Deep South's delegates were far more ambivalent. Georgia had refused to send any delegates at all because, its leaders explained, elite opinion "seemed to fluctuate between liberty and convenience." Four of South Carolina's five representatives to the Congress were fearful of

taking steps that might result in a break with the empire. They opposed the proposed ban on exports and generally hoped that the boycott on British imports would convince London to back down.[16]

True to stereotype, the New Netherland delegation was wracked by internal bickering. Of their nine delegates, five were against resisting London. The four revolutionaries were all men opposed to the imperial status quo in New York: two middle-class Dutchmen, a lawyer transplanted from Yankee-settled Orange County, and Philip Livingston, an Albany-born, Yale-educated Presbyterian. The conservatives looked on these men as rustic, uncouth commoners. The New Netherland conservatives—who represented a majority of both the New York and New Jersey delegations—were proper gentlemen who wished to avoid open rebellion and outright independence, as they knew they would be unlikely to win many popular elections on account of heavy Yankee in-migration, especially in upstate New York. As distant commerce was the essential foundation of New Netherland's economic system, they also opposed the proposed boycotts of British trade but would ultimately be outvoted by delegates from the other nations.[17]

Delegates from the Midlands were nearly unanimous in their timidity, regardless of whether they represented Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, or Maryland. Eleven of the thirteen Midlander delegates were opposed to armed resistance and believed Britain had every right to tax and govern its colonial subjects. The leader of the overall conservative movement at the Congress was Midlander Joseph Galloway of Philadelphia, who argued that intercolonial cooperation was impossible because the colonies were "totally independent of each other" in law, customs, and goals. He put forward an alternative to the Yankee strategy: the colonies would remain in the empire but would demand an "American legislature" which would share lawmaking powers with the British Parliament, with each body able to veto the other. While supported by conservative New Netherlanders, the plan was rejected by the Yankee, Tidewater, and Deep Southern delegates, who refused to transfer further control of what they explicitly termed their "countries" to a central authority.[18]

Most revealing, the sixth nation was not represented at the Congress at all, though it held perhaps a majority of the population of Pennsylvania and both Carolinas. The colonial assemblies refused to allow Appalachia