



GENERAL OVERVIEW

Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to initiate meaningful dialogue about **THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION** documentary; the historical events leading up to, during, and immediately after the founding of the United States; and the themes of liberty, freedom, democracy, and independence, and how they were understood and discussed at the time and today. Additional discussion themes could include union, empire, civic war, and possibility.

If you are hosting an engagement event around the film, please share these questions with panelists and speakers ahead of time to allow them to prepare—particularly taking into account the historical background and/or expertise necessary to properly discuss some of these topics.

Additional resources may be found in **THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION Engagement Resource Center** at pbs.org/americanrevolution/resources. Film excerpts to accompany these questions may be accessed in the General Documentary Overview Toolkit. To learn more about **THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**, a film by Ken Burns, Sarah Botstein, and David Schimdt, please visit PBS.org/americanrevolution.

Foundational Causes & Ideology around the American Revolution

- What were some of the most significant causes of the American Revolution—economic, political, or ideological?
- How did Enlightenment ideas influence the American colonists' push for independence?
- What specific British policies and taxes most angered the colonists, and why?
- How did the idea of “no taxation without representation” evolve into a call for independence? What has been the long-term influence of this idea on our national identity?
- How did the desire to expand territories westward contribute to the American Revolution?
- To what extent did the Revolution reflect broader Enlightenment ideals such as liberty, natural rights, and self-governance?
- How did colonial experiences with local self-rule influence their resistance to British authority?
- How do you think Britain could have prevented the Revolution through better governance or compromise?
- When colonists disguised themselves as Native Americans during the Boston Tea Party, what symbolic messages did this convey about the emerging American identity and their defiance of British authority?
- The historian Christopher Brown says in the introduction of the film, “I’m not sure there is a state, anywhere in the world, in the late 18th Century, that has as wide variety of people who inhabit it. And, so, it really is actually kind of remarkable, the way that that nation ends up cohering, not around culture, not around religion, not around ancient history. It was coming together around a set of purposes and ideals for one common cause.” What is he referring to in terms of variety? And what were the ideals and purposes that people came together around?
- How important was it for the colonies to unite in order to win the war? What did it take to bring them together as the United States?



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- How were violence and intimidation used by both sides to win loyalty over the opposition? Was it successful? When did it backfire?
- What might factor into an American Loyalist's choice to fight against the rebellions? How did the war impact their lives and what choices were they faced with in peacetime?
- How does the inclusion of multiple perspectives change how we understand the Revolution's beginnings?
- How important was morale and public support in sustaining the revolutionary cause?

Events Leading Up to the War

- What were the major events that caused tension between the American colonies and the British government before the Revolution?
- What would it feel like to live under laws you had no voice in creating, like the Stamp Act or Tea Act?
- How did ordinary people—farmers, tradespeople, women, and youth—get involved in resistance before the war?
- What kinds of community actions (like boycotts or town meetings) helped shape the movement toward independence? How do we see echoes of those community actions in modern social or political movements?
- How do you think people in your community would have reacted to rising tensions with Britain if they had been American colonists in the 1770s?

Key Figures & Perspectives from THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

- How did leaders like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benedict Arnold, the Marquis de Lafayette, Charles Cornwallis, and King George III shape the outcome of the Revolution?
- How do you think about the Founding Fathers? How has your view changed since watching the film?
- How did George Washington's leadership shape the Continental Army and the outcome of the war?
- How did Benjamin Franklin's diplomacy in France affect international support for the Revolution?
- What risks did the signers of the Declaration of Independence take, and how do we view their legacy today?
- What roles did women play—as spies, organizers, fundraisers, or caretakers—and how has history remembered them?
- How did the Revolution shape the lives of less-discussed characters like Mercy Otis Warren, Joseph Plumb Martin, Phillis Wheatley, Nathanael Greene, and James Forten?
- How could people at the margins of colonial society use the rhetoric of the Revolution—and particularly of the Declaration of Independence—to further their own claims to participate in American Democracy (both at the time of the Revolution and after)?
- What might factor into an American Loyalist's choice to fight against the rebellions? How did the war impact their lives and what choices were they faced with in peacetime?
- How were Loyalists viewed during and after the war, and how should we remember their perspective?
- What were the tens of thousands of revolutionaries fighting for?
- Were those Americans who joined the Revolution for the promise of more social mobility, freedoms, and opportunities disappointed in the end result?
- How did the Revolution affect enslaved people and the institution of slavery? How did enslaved people find opportunity in the Revolution to better their own and their descendants' futures?



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- How could fighting in the Revolutionary War—on either the British or the Patriot side—win enslaved people their freedom?
- What choices did Native Americans make, as nations or individuals, during the Revolutionary War? Why do you think they made those choices?
- How did the war affect Native American nations, and why did many choose to ally with the British?

General Military History & Strategy

- On the morning of April 19, 1775, there was no war. By the end of the day, more than a hundred people had died in battle. How did Lexington and Concord galvanize the colonies into action?
- From a military perspective, what were the key turning points of the Revolutionary War?
- What advantages and disadvantages did the Continental Army face compared to the British Army?
- How was the Battle of Bunker Hill a pyrrhic victory for the British? How would it haunt them for the rest of the war?
- How did Generals Howe and Clinton surprise Washington at Long Island? How bad was it? And what did Washington learn after his escape to Manhattan?
- How critical was the Battle of Saratoga as a turning point in the war? What were some of the other battles in the Saratoga Campaign?
- How low was American morale after the failure to recapture Savannah, the fall of Charleston, and the disaster at Camden? How did southern Patriots turn things around?
- How did the Yorktown Campaign come together? What did it take to win it? What did Cornwallis's surrender mean?
- What did Benedict Arnold's treason mean for the Revolutionary Cause? What was his initial plan and how could that have affected the course of the rest of the war?
- Why did the British engage in a Southern Strategy?
- What role did irregular warfare (ambushes, surprise attacks, militias) play in the American strategy, and how did it change the nature of the conflict?
- Were American guerrilla tactics against British and Loyalist forces seen as legitimate at the time, or were they viewed as dishonorable?
- How did geography and local knowledge benefit the colonists?
- What role did weather play during the war?
- To what extent did the Revolution blur the line between war and civil conflict, especially in divided communities?
- How did the use of violence by Patriot militias affect relationships with civilians and Loyalist neighbors?
- Was the level of violence used during the Revolutionary War justified by the cause of independence?
- How did violence against civilians—by both Patriots and Loyalists—shape public support for or against the Revolution?
- How did the violence of the war differ in various regions (e.g., the North vs. the South, frontier vs. coastal cities)?
- How did violence affect non-combatants, such as women, children, and enslaved people caught between sides?



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Global Context & Impact

- The American Revolution was a global war. How did people from other nations find themselves participants in this war—either contributing to the American victory or fighting on the side of the British?
- What were the Revolution's effects on British politics and society?
- How did Britain's experience in the American Revolution affect the Empire's course after the war?
- How did the American Revolution represent a broader shift in global power?
- What were the geopolitical motivations behind France and Spain supporting the American cause?
- How did Britain's global empire fare after losing the American colonies?
- How did the Revolution change the global perception of monarchy and democracy?
- What did other colonial powers learn from the American Revolution about managing their own colonies?
- How important was foreign aid (especially from France and Spain) to the American victory?
- Can you identify other revolutions that looked to the American Revolution for inspiration? How did those revolutions take inspiration from the American Revolution?

Founding Documents And Their Legacies

- How has the United States Constitution's opening declaration, "*We the People*," profoundly shaped and continued to define the concept of American identity and self-governance?
- How did the Revolution shape the development of the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights?
- In what ways did the Revolution fulfill its promise of liberty and equality for all Americans? In what ways did it not?
- In what ways did the Articles of Confederation reflect revolutionary ideals—and why did they fail?
- How did the United States Constitution seek to balance liberty with order?
- To what extent did the Bill of Rights address the issues that led to the Revolution?
- Did the Revolution succeed in creating a more just and equal society?
- The Declaration of Independence states that, "*all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*" How should we reconcile the ideals of the Revolution with the continued existence of slavery in the new republic? The historian Bernard Bailyn explains in the film that after the Revolution there was not a time when slavery was not a major public issue. What did he mean by that statement?

Relevancy Today

- What does the American Revolution teach us about who we are as a nation today?
- What are ways that communities today can make their voices heard when they feel change is needed?
- How have Americans used the experience and history of the American Revolution to argue for greater freedoms throughout our history?
- Are the ideals of "liberty," "freedom," and "democracy" still powerful motivators in modern society?
- Do you think the American Revolution's values are fully realized in the United States today? Why or why not?



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- How do movements for independence or civil rights in other countries echo the spirit of the American Revolution?
- In the Gettysburg Address, President Abraham Lincoln called for a “new birth of freedom.” What did he mean by that phrase and how was it connected to the American Revolution?
- How has the American Revolution influenced other independence movements around the world (e.g., Haiti, Latin America, Africa)?
- Why do other countries still study or reference the American Revolution in discussions of freedom and democracy?
- Can the American Revolution be both an inspiration and a cautionary tale to other nations?
- What might people in other parts of the world see differently about the American Revolution than Americans do?
- How were the founding ideals of “liberty,” “equality,” “property,” and “democracy” threatened by the continued practices of slavery and colonization?
- How does the American Revolution represent hope for a better future? How does it stand as a symbol for unfulfilled promises? Can it be both?
- What lessons from the Revolution can help young people understand civic responsibility today?
- How can communities use the story of the Revolution to inspire local action or change?
- What does “independence” mean for people in today’s interconnected, globalized world?
- In what ways are people still fighting for their voices to be heard—locally or globally—just as colonists once did?
- What’s the difference between a political revolution and a cultural or ideological one?
- What myths or oversimplifications about the Revolution have shaped how we understand “what it means to be American”?
- Is revolution still relevant as a concept today—or should we be thinking in terms of reform, evolution, or transformation instead?
- Can you think of moments in history—or today—when people protested unfair treatment? How do those moments compare to The American Revolution?
- What does “revolution” mean to you?
- How do we balance honoring the past with questioning and rethinking the way history has been told?
- What lessons can today’s communities learn from how colonists organized, resisted, and debated change?
- What lessons from the American Revolution are most relevant today?

Sharing Our American Story

- People of all backgrounds, ages, beliefs and races participated in the Revolution. How were their voices presented in the film? What do we learn hearing from more people about their experiences during the American Revolution?
- How can we better include a variety of voices in a story like that of the American Revolution? How might the story of the American Revolution look different from different points of view?
- How can genealogy help uncover untold Revolutionary War stories within families and communities?
- How does the way we tell the story of the Revolution influence our understanding of freedom and democracy today?
- How can you differentiate between myth and fact when studying an event like the American Revolution?
- How can storytelling be used to connect young people to the American Revolution in a meaningful way?
- How can art, poetry, music, or theater be used to tell Revolutionary War stories that feel alive and relevant today?



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- How can families or communities use personal storytelling to reclaim or reinterpret their Revolutionary past?
- Can storytelling help us share different perspectives and experiences about an event like the American Revolution?
- What responsibilities do storytellers, educators, and historians have when shaping narratives about the past?
- How can storytelling around the Revolution help us better understand the complexities of identity, liberty, and justice in America today?

Art, Music, Literature, and Culture—Now and Then

- What visual symbols or artistic styles became especially prominent during the Revolution?
- Were there specific painters or illustrators whose work helped immortalize the founding in national memory?
- How was art used as a form of propaganda during this time?
- Very few people had the resources to commission a painting. Do paintings give us a full picture of a time?
- What role did music play in unifying people or communicating revolutionary ideals?
- How was music used to rally citizens before and during the revolution?
- Were there specific songs or musical forms that gained popularity during the Revolution?
- Did music function more as a morale booster, a protest tool, or a vehicle for coded communication?
- How did music traditions of enslaved, immigrant, and indigenous populations come together in America during the time of the Revolution?
- Were there poets or writers whose words became rallying cries for revolution?
- How did revolutionary leaders themselves use poetry or written rhetoric to inspire action?
- How was poetry circulated—was it public, underground, or elite?
- Do you see a clear link between the literary style of the time and the political goals of the Revolution?
- Thomas Paine was the greatest popular writer at the time of the American Revolution. What were some of his works and how and why were they used during that war and later?
- How did artistic expressions reflect the tensions and hopes of ordinary people, not just the elite?
- After viewing the film, what surprised you most about how art, music, or poetry shaped the Revolutionary period?

Faith & Freedom in America

- When the United States was founded, many countries in Europe had official state religions. As the film points out, there was religious diversity within and among the thirteen British colonies that declared independence, and the United States never established an official religion. How did embracing religious diversity in North America contribute to the success of the American Revolution? How do you think the lack of state-established religion impacts American life today?
- Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved woman, was the first African American to publish a book of poetry. During the war, she wrote: “. . . in every breast, God has implanted a principle, which we call love of freedom; it is impatient of oppression” in a letter to Presbyterian minister and Mohegan tribal member Samson Occom in 1774. What do you make of the inclusion of religious language in her appeal for freedom?



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- Religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Europe sometimes spilled over into the thirteen colonies, where Catholics were a small minority. The Quebec Act of 1774, which protected the rights of the Catholic inhabitants of this formerly French colony now part of the British Empire, was one of many grievances cited in the Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless, Catholics and Protestants fought alongside one another in the Revolutionary War. The United States and Catholic France became allies in 1778. What do you think this can tell us about American attitudes toward religion in the 18th Century?
- The Declaration of Independence invokes “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” as the foundation for “unalienable” human rights. What does this suggest about the role of religion at the time of the founding? Does this challenge or reinforce how many people today understand this aspect of US history?
- Americans of many faiths, including a variety of Christian denominations, Jewish congregations, Muslims, and practitioners of African and indigenous spiritual traditions, fought in the American Revolution. Does this information about the religious differences in 18th-century North America change your understanding of this period? If so, how and why?
- In the film, Jefferson is quoted as saying: “But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” What do you think this means? How do modern approaches to religious diversity differ from Jefferson’s thoughts on the matter?
- What religions do you see in your community? Think about the different kinds of religious buildings you pass by every week.

The Spirit of Service

- The American Revolution was driven by Enlightenment-era ideals—liberty, self-governance, and the belief that ordinary people had the right and duty to shape their own government. How did these beliefs create a foundation for volunteerism and civic responsibility today?
- “We the People” wasn’t just rhetoric—it was a call to action for every citizen to take part in building and sustaining a just society. How has the idea of “service to others” shaped the founding and development of the United States?
- In what ways did early American figures (like soldiers, community leaders, abolitionists) express a spirit of service?
- Before a strong federal government existed, many American communities relied on town hall meetings and local organizations for public safety and mutual aid. How does the concept of mutual aid and grassroots organizing present itself today?
- How does the concept of service relate to the ideals of liberty, democracy, and civic duty?
- During the Revolutionary War, local militias were made up of everyday people—farmers, blacksmiths, teachers—who left their homes to fight for a common cause. How did this action of volunteerism help create a national ethos where service to community and country is seen as honorable and necessary, even without direct reward?
- Many 18th-century religious leaders preached that helping others was a moral and spiritual obligation and faith communities played a big role in promoting service. How does this legacy still resonate today? What are some ways that faith-based organizations contribute to our civic society?
- How did the American Revolution create not just a new government, but a new idea of citizenship? How was this new idea rooted in service, responsibility, and the belief that ordinary people can and should shape the world around them?
- Is service—whether military, civic, or volunteer—a form of patriotism? Why or why not?



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- What are different ways people serve the United States today (beyond military service)?
- How do public service roles—teachers, nurses, first responders, activists—carry forward values of Revolutionary America?
- What motivates people to serve their community or country?
- How has the meaning of service evolved in today's society?
- Do you believe service should be an expectation of citizenship? Why or why not?
- How can service help build a stronger, more unified country/community?
- What barriers prevent more people from being able to serve their communities? How can we remove them?
- What kinds of service do young people value? How are young people's attitudes toward service similar to or different from those of other generations?
- How can schools and communities encourage a lifelong spirit of service?
- AmeriCorps, a network of domestic service programs engaging Americans in community-based initiatives across the U.S. and the Peace Corps, which dispatches volunteers to work on sustainable development projects in countries abroad, are two of the most well-known national service programs in the United States. If you could design a national service program, what would it look like and who would it serve?
- What is one act of service that made a lasting impact on your life—or someone else's?

Genealogy and Historical Records Research

- How did the American Revolution affect family structures and migration patterns in early America?
- How might enslaved people, free Blacks and Indigenous communities have found themselves involved in the American Revolution, and can this be traced through genealogy?
- How did Loyalist families adjust or relocate after the Revolution—and how can those migrations be traced?
- What challenges exist in researching African American or Indigenous ancestors from the Revolutionary era?
- Why is it important to understand the personal stories of ordinary families when studying the American Revolution?
- How can someone find out if a family member was a Patriot or Loyalist? Enslaved or free?
- What records exist for Revolutionary War soldiers? How can those records be located and accessed?
- What resources are available to discover Revolutionary War pension records?
- What resources are available for people to find out if their ancestor received land for military service in the American Revolution?
- Are church records or wills from the 18th century useful for tracing Revolutionary-era ancestors?

Revolutionary Youth

- Who were some of the youngest contributors to the Revolution?
- How do we know about the young people like Betsy Ambler who lived during the Revolution?
- What kinds of roles did children and teenagers play during the Revolutionary War?
- How might the daily life of a young person have changed during the war?
- What would it have been like to be a young person whose family supported the Patriots? What about a Loyalist family?



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- Who were the young people who served as soldiers, messengers, musicians, or spies? What risks did they face?
- How might the war have impacted young people differently depending on their race, gender, or social class?
- How would the war have felt different for an enslaved child compared to a wealthy white child in the colonies?
- What were the experiences of Indigenous children during this time?
- Why don't we hear more stories about young people in the American Revolution?
- What can we learn by researching young people's letters, diaries, or family stories from the 1770s?
- Do you think young people today would have made the same choices as youth in the 1770s? Why or why not?
- How do the stories of young people in the Revolution help us understand the broader impact of war on families and communities?
- If you lived in 1776, how might your life be the same or different from young people back then?
- What does the bravery or sacrifice of young people during the Revolution tell us about youth leadership today?
- What questions would you ask a young person who lived during the Revolution if you could interview them today?