

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 347: The American Revolution (Part 1)

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The page of future history will tell how Britain planted, nourished, and for two centuries preserved a second British Empire.

How strengthened by her sons, she rose to such a pitch of power that this little island proved too mighty for the greatest efforts of the greatest nations.

Within the space of twenty years, the world beheld her arms triumphant in every quarter of the globe, her fleets displayed victorious banners, her sails were spread and conquest graced the canvas.

Historic truth must likewise relate. Within the same little space of time, how Britain fell to half her greatness.

How strangely lost, by misjudging ministers, by rash-advised councils, gracious sovereign George III saw more than half his empire crumble beneath his scepter.

America, late the strength, now the foe to Britain, dismembered, torn, I fear forever lost to England, whence she sprung.

So Tom, that was the Duke of Manchester in November 1775 in a House of Laws debate about using foreign troops in the colonies in the American War of Independence.

So this is, for us in Britain, the funny thing about this is we don't really know much about this at all, do we?

It looms so large in the consciousness of Americans, but it's not taught in Britain. It doesn't really have any great purchase on our national imagination.

It's weird, isn't it? How in Britain, we don't really know very much about wars that we lose.

No, but for the funny thing is, I knew you were going to say that, but I thought to myself, we actually love defeats.

So Gordon and Karthume.

Yes, but they're heroic.

Heroic defeats, right, exactly.

And heroic defeats in which ultimately we prevail.

Maybe, maybe, maybe you're right.

So, you know, in the Duke of Manchester's comment there, that I fear forever lost to England, I mean, he wasn't wrong.

Very tragic.

Yes.

So the American Revolution, an enormous subject, one in which many of our listeners will have strong opinions, I think it's fair to say, Tom.

Certainly those who live in America, although the funny, as we said, the funny thing is that our British listeners probably won't have strong opinions because they don't really know anything about it.

And we're going to cover it in the next two weeks in a mighty epic.

And we have recruited a mighty expert, have we not?

We have.

And this expert, like ourselves, is British.

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Yeah.

So, all our American listeners will be thrilled to get the perspective from the mother country. It's important that the podcast is not polluted by any bias, which is why we didn't have an American. And Tom, we welcome back to the podcast Professor Adam Smith, who is the Edward Osborne Professor of History at Oxford.

That's right, isn't it, Adam?

And directs with the Rothermere American Institute.

That's right, Dom.

I guess it's good to be back.

So, Adam, a massive subject, a tragic subject, some might say.

And maybe we should start, since this is such a black hole in the British imagination, by giving a picture of the colonies.

So we are in, we're not quite yet in the 1770s, are we?

Because we're going to do the sort of, we need to paint a picture before we really get stuck in.

So, we did a podcast a few weeks ago with Malcolm Gaskell about witches in New England.

And that was in the late 17th century.

But a century on, where are we? What do the colonies look like?

They look very prosperous, very confident, very populace.

The Royal Navy calculated that the population of the colonies were two inches taller than the population of England.

And that tells you a lot, doesn't it, in the 1750s and 1760s?

About one and a half million people lived in the colonies, the 13 colonies that were to go on to rebel.

And they were used to self-government in practice.

And this is obviously really important in terms of the story that we're going to tell.

They had different kinds of charters.

Some were royal colonies, some were established in different ways.

But in one way or another, they all had forms of representative government.

And because property was much more easily accessible, they all had property qualifications.

The property franchise, just as was the case in Great Britain.

But in practice, this meant that a much wider, much wider number of people could vote and participate in government.

In New England, they had this very strongly entrenched tradition of town meetings.

And so there was this really active participation in the formulation of policy and the running of local affairs.

And so London seemed a very long way away.

In another sense, London seemed closer perhaps than the other colonies.

It was easier to get from Boston to London than it was from Boston to Charlestown in South Carolina.

There was a post road from Boston to New York, but it was a trial to get from Boston to Philadelphia. So there wasn't much inter-colonial interaction.

But nevertheless, they were separate from the mother country in terms of practical governance.

That didn't mean they felt separate though.

They were patriotic Englishmen and they said that repeatedly right up until the breach in 1776.

So Adam, what is the British kind of governmental presence in the New World?

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Well, it's very slight, Tom.

But the Seven Years War, which I know you've also done a podcast about, haven't you?

So I don't know whether you want to get into that now.

But the Seven Years War really changed the dynamic because then there was a British military presence.

There was a distant London supervision of the colonies.

There was a Secretary of State for America and there was a complex system of navigation laws, the mercantilist system,

which attempted to restrict colonial trade, although it wasn't very good at doing so.

It was an incredibly leaky system.

So there was a broad framework of law within the context of Britain and the allegiance to the British royal family,

which Englishmen on the other side of the Atlantic always felt.

But the Seven Years War was the moment when presence was felt on the ground, I think.

And so the Seven Years War in America is generally known as the French and Indian War.

Is that right?

That's right, yes.

And that kind of sums up what the stakes are for Britain and for the 13 colonies in North America because they are faced with two foes.

They're faced with the French, which have a massive imperial presence in Canada and kind of reaching into the center of North America.

And of course they have the Indians, as they were called, the Native Americans, who are also very, very kind of sizable confederations at this point.

And yet the British emerge victorious from that war.

The French are basically expelled from the New World.

And the corollary of that is that there is a huge military presence now in America.

And that presumably is something that hadn't been the case prior to the Seven Years War.

Exactly.

This is really, this whole story over all these episodes of the American Revolution is really a story about the French.

It's a story about British relations with Europe in one sense.

And you ask about British presence in America.

If you're a British administrator in Whitehall thinking about your colonies in the middle of the 18th century,

you're not really worried about what's going to happen in the port cities in Boston and Philadelphia not before the 1860s.

What you're worried about, as you say, Tom, is the French presence in the interior and the question of the balance of power in Europe

and how the European presence in North America might affect that.

Is it not also the case, Adam, that when people talk about the colonies,

they're really talking about, I mean, if you were to say to somebody in 1740,

I'm going out to the colonies, I'm very worried about the colonies.

You're talking about Barbados, Jamaica.

Absolutely.

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The incredibly lucrative islands of the Caribbean rather than, are they backwaters?
Is that too strong to describe the...

It's too strong because in population terms, there was so much more populace.

But that's absolutely right.

There were 26 British colonies in the New World in the middle of the 18th century.

Only half of them rebelled in what we call the American Revolution.

And we'll get onto this later.

But in one sense, the American War of Independence was not, by any means, a complete disaster for the British because what they managed to stave off was the much more worrying prospect of losing the sugar islands, Jamaica, Barbados and Tigua, which they avoided, not without having to fight naval battles against the French and the Spanish.

So, Adam, a kind of amazing stat that the mainland North America's largest crop is tobacco and that sells for an average of 750,000 pounds a year.

But the sugar cane and the molasses and the rum and everything from the West Indies is fetching an annual average of nearly 4 million pounds.

So, that gives a really impressive sense of what's at stake.

But again, just to go back to the strategic situation in North America with the French and the Native Americans,

there's a key expedition, isn't there, in 1755, led by General Braddock, who is striking out to try and capture a French fort in what's now Pittsburgh.

And this ends disastrously, Braddock ends up dead.

It's one of the kind of the great military defeats in British history.

But the thing that's intriguing about it is the involvement of two people from the North American colonies.

One of them, a young officer called George Washington, who is very keen to get a commission with the British Army and kind of serves as an aide-de-camp to General Braddock.

And the other one is a man in Philadelphia called Benjamin Franklin, who furnishes, I think, 150 wagons.

And both of those, you know, these young men at that time are very, very patriotic, very, very pro-British.

Yes, and in both cases, and especially in Washington's case, also very keen on the acquisition of land in the Ohio Valley.

And that's what's driving a lot of this.

What is the concern about potential French alliances with Native American tribes and the constantly shifting relations with indigenous people?

It's that there is this constant sense that there is huge wealth out there in land in the Ohio Valley.

And George Washington is personally really invested in that.

He's a seigneur as well as a military officer.

Although he's from a very wealthy Virginia family and he marries the richest widow in Virginia, he still ends up as 18th century gentleman, often did, hugely indebted.

And wants more land.

So he, like hundreds and thousands of other American colonists, have a very personal financial investment in white European expansion beyond the Appalachians.

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And that's key to this story.

That issue about the pressure for land, the colonists pushing in land, even before the 70s war, is there a sense that the British, the Metropole, as it were, that they're trying to restrain them from doing that?

Is there a sort of tension there or does that not come in until the end of the 70s war?

I don't think the Metropole, before the 70s war, really has the capacity to try to do that, Dominic, but they become extremely conscious of it in the context of the 70s war

because that's when they have to spend, the British government has to spend an extraordinary amount of money

in dealing with the consequences of the flight over land in the West.

But Adam, isn't one of the kind of the paradoxical consequences of the 70s war

that it actually generates incredible tensions between British subjects of the crown in America and those in Britain because the British government and the American Colonials draw entirely separate conclusions.

The British government's conclusion is that it's absolutely essential for the stability of the British Empire in North America

that Native Americans be kept on board, that they stay happy to be in alliance with Britain.

Whereas Americans like George Washington think the lesson is we should go for this, we should cross the Appalachians, we should settle these very, very rich lands that lie beyond, and there's a kind of inherent conflict of interests there that will get more and more polarizing as the years and then the decades go past.

Yes, that's exactly right, Tom, and the proclamation line of 1763 is the British government's efforts.

At least temporarily, I mean they later pushed the line further westwards, I mean before the American Revolution,

but it's their attempt to say this far and no further,

and they also know that the only way to police that line is to retain British regular troops in North America.

And that then becomes the source of conflict as well because they need to be paid for.

Yeah, so I'm just looking at the stats.

So 1763, which is when the proclamation is made.

So 1763 is also the final year of the Seven Years War, I think I'm right in saying.

It's also the year of Pontiac's rebellion.

So that's an Indian, I mean uprising is perhaps not the right word because it implies sort of formal subordination,

but there's a guy called Pontiac leads a group of Native Americans,

they go into Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, they kill 2,000 people.

Is that the one where they're playing a lacrosse match and they chuck a ball into a fort and then pretend to go and get the ball back and then massacre everyone?

Is that right?

My knowledge of lacrosse is very sketchy.

It's a top sports related massacre.

Right, but I'm just looking at the figures.

I think it is Tom, you're right.

Yes.

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Britain's debt at that point, 1763 is £137 million.

So that's the war debt and the interest alone on that debt is £5 million a year.

And before the war, Britain's annual peacetime budget had been £8 million a year.

So presumably that issue of, oh, the colonists are going to keep pushing, keep pushing, keep pushing and we need troops either to stop them from doing so or to deal with the inevitable ructions among the Native Americans when they do do it.

That must be absolute for the British, for British governments in a very small state world.

Yeah.

That's intolerable, presumably the idea of spending all that money just throwing money away.

It's a complete crisis.

I mean, the Seven Years' War is, the British victory in the Seven Years' War is a glorious and incredible victory and it's much celebrated across England and of course it's a war fought all around the world, not just in North America.

But it brings with it the problems of peace are immense and the financial burdens are where it really hits.

The difficulties of, of course we haven't even got into the question of Quebec as well and the Catholic French population in Quebec, which has now become part of the British Empire and the question of how the British government tries to bring those people into the British Empire as well is also part of the story.

So the poor administrators in Whitehall having to deal with this problem and the new government that comes in after the end of the Seven Years' War has a huge set of difficulties and they're not looking at this, of course, from the perspective of the 13 colonies.

I mean, they don't know what's going to happen over the next 20 years.

None of them have ever been there.

Americans visit.

Ben Franklin's always coming over and giving his, dispensing his wisdom.

But, you know, they're trying to, they're trying to run this huge complex world empire with a very shaky tax base.

The British people are hugely taxed, the most taxed in Europe.

There's all kinds of strains in trying to run this empire and, you know, the last thing they need are continual trouble from their white colonists in the 13 colonies who they think, well, they've got everything they want anyway.

They're very under tax.

They've got lots of cheap land.

What do they need more in the Ohio River Valley for?

And that's an entirely understandable set of assumptions, I think, viewed from Whitehall in 1763.

What people in Whitehall and indeed in London, so we were just, you know, you were joking about Benjamin Franklin's folksy wisdom.

I was under the impression he was, is he not talking about test tubes and things like that?

I mean, is that not his, is he not science?

Tom, is he something to do with science?

Lightning, yeah.

Lightning rod.

He's talking about lightning rods.

I know that people enjoy that.

But what do people generally think when they think about Americans?

I think they do think of them as different when they encounter them.

I mean, the New Englanders at least sounded different.

I mean, they had Yankee accents.

There are phonetic reports of the way that Americans spoke, which clearly British people found deeply amusing.

And obviously, there'd been many, many generations.

I mean, you know, there's 150 years between the first settlement of these colonies and the time what we're talking about.

So this is, these are long established places that have grown in ways that are quite different from the Metropole.

So somebody like George Washington, Adam.

So George Washington, of course, doesn't even have his own teeth.

George Washington, his accent.

What did he have sounded like if he was talking to us now?

Why does anybody from HBO or whoever it is think that George Washington sounds like that?

I mean, I love the idea that he did.

He had wooden teeth, of course, as well, wouldn't he?

Which would no doubt also have impeded it.

So if people in America are, I mean, their accents are kind of recognizable.

Yes.

As kind of being British to many people in Britain.

How are people in Britain viewing Americans?

Are they seeing them as basically British people or as perhaps as relics from the 17th century kind of people who are from the past of Britain, but kind of living fossils, if you like?

I think that's right.

But that actually points to something important in what you just said there, Tom, which is I'm not sure really that people in Britain would have seen Americans in the 13 colonies in all in the same way.

They would have seen the southern planters, the South Carolinians and the Virginians, and perhaps in much the same way as they saw the planters of the Caribbean.

Whereas the New Englanders, they just would have seen as the descendants of the Cromwellian humulus Puritan types and would have seen them in quite a different light.

Because I mean, it's crucial, isn't it, to understanding what's happening in the colonies that there are actually very different religious dispensations as well.

So you've got the Puritan Presbyterian establishment in New England and you've got the Quakers in Philadelphia, the city of Brotherly Love, and it's kind of much more Anglican tinge to other colonies.

With established churches in Virginia, there was an Anglican Church of England establishment and quite different religious feel.

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And the colonists themselves were constantly talking about this.

I mean, George Washington had never been to New England before he went to Boston to take command of the Continental Army.

I mean, why would he have done?

He'd been to the Caribbean, which sort of makes this point about the similar interests and values of the southern planters and the sugar islands.

But he saw these New Englanders as just this kind of weird, dirty rabble with this strange religion and very alien to him.

But one thing we haven't yet talked about, Adam, which is massive, surely, is the great awakening.

So that sweeps across the colonies in the early part of the 18th, sort of early to mid-18th century, this sort of evangelical enthusiasm, people having these meetings and talking about God.

And that surely has a massive impact on life in the colonies, doesn't it?

It does and it takes place in Great Britain as well and with many of the same preachers.

George Whitfield being the most famous who sailed to the Americas in 1739, having been turned to evangelical religion while he was at Pembroke College, Oxford, something that's happened to several people since then.

Hey, we'd know someone like that, Adam, don't we?

We do.

We do.

He was a member of something when he was at Oxford.

He was a member of something called the Holy Club.

Anyway, George Whitfield was an extraordinary public speaker.

In fact, Benjamin Franklin, who, as you say, Dominic, was a scientist, did all these experiments when he went to listen to George Whitfield.

He wasn't really interested in what George Whitfield was saying, but he was interested in how George Whitfield projected his voice and how far he could project and how many people, so he did all these calculations about how many people could hear George Whitfield at a single moment.

But as you say, the colonies were swept by this religious fervour, not evenly and certainly more in New England than elsewhere.

And historians over the years have tried to connect, not wholly implausibly, the great awakening with the coming of the American Revolution on the grounds that evangelicalism is about the individual.

It's about distrust of formal authority, about a direct relationship with God, about taking control of your own life.

Would the American Revolution have happened without the great awakening?

Probably, but it may well have looked a little bit different.

Okay.

Well, things are clearly breaking down between Britain and the colonists.

So, I think we should take a break and when we come back, find out what happens.

Hello, welcome back to The Rest is History.

We are looking at the American War of Independence, the Revolutionary War, whatever you want to

call it.

And we have the great Adam Smith with us to talk us through these complex issues. Just following on from this idea that there are different religious dispensations in the various colonies.

I mean, doesn't that actually have implication as well for how the various colonists, the respective colonists, understand how government functions?

Because the whole thing in New England, the kind of the Puritan idea is that you do have self-government.

And again, in Quaker Philadelphia, there would be different understandings of the ideal form of government and in the much more kind of Anglican states in the south.

Again, they would have a different understanding of what it would mean to be what the ideal form of government should be.

That's definitely how I see it, Tom.

It's not that the inhabitants of the 13 colonies didn't like self-government and independence. They did.

The question was what that meant.

Up until 1775, they believed they could have self-government and independence and the regulation of their own trade effectively and could tax themselves all within the British Empire.

What made that in the end seem impossible to them were the actions of the British government.

And so in 1763, everything we've been talking about here, these attempts to raise revenue in the colonies just in order to defray the costs of keeping a standing army essentially on the frontier and to crack down on the widespread smuggling that was happening, the avoidance of the Navigation Acts, the rules that regulated trade in the British Empire.

This attempt just to professionalize and modernize the governance of the British Empire, which Prime Minister George Grenville started to try to do extremely sensibly from his point of view in 1763, that ended what had seemed to be this long period of benign neglect from London.

And that's the change.

That's where the action came from.

Those are the people making the moves in London.

So Adam, I mean, I know a lot of halluciners will think this is very unfair, but could you reasonably say that actually what's happening here is a British government is finally grasping the net, they've allowed a very shambolic system to continue for decades with loads of smuggling, all this stuff.

And finally, in a very enlightenment way, they're like, right, let's sort this out, let's put it on an even keel, proper defence for the colonies, proper organization, pay your taxes.

You know, it's not anything tyrannical, it's not anything new.

I know people will think this is unfair and taking the British side, but that is kind of reasonable way of putting it.

I'm sure there will be listeners who will think that's a very unfair way of putting it, Dominic, but I think it's entirely reasonable.

And the dimension here, which you haven't mentioned, is the role of parliament in Westminster, because I mentioned Prime Minister Grenville, it's the British government in London acting through parliament.

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And of course, what everybody in Britain understands, but which it seems most people in the colonies

don't fully understand, is the glorious revolution, which establishes, as you know, the principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

This amorphous but important idea of the king in parliament.

And so it is, all of these people we're talking about on the British side are some of them become known as Tories, but all of them, broadly speaking, are wiggish in the sense that they all support the settlement of 1689, of the glorious revolution.

And therefore, for them, the supremacy of parliament is the non-negotiable thing.

But there's a sense, isn't there, that actually the American colonists, by opposing this ideal of parliament, one that's been, you know, very hard one, are actually playing the part of royalists.

I mean, there are people who, in England, who call the American colonists royalists.

Yes, well, I mean, rightly so.

I mean, the colonists are Tories in the real sense of the word.

I mean, they are directly, at various points up until 1775, they're directly petitioning the king to act unconstitutionally, to override parliament in the way that the Stuart kings could have done, but George III was never prepared to do.

Even though, of course, you know, in the long run, the strategy of the American revolutionaries is to say that George III is actually the tyrant.

It's a very, but that maneuver to focus on George III, Tom, is something that only happens at the very, very end.

That's the maneuver of the Declaration of Independence and the short run up to it in 1776.

Up until then, the colonists are sending loyal addresses to the king, petitioning him to listen to their grievances.

Despite the fact that George III is, because he's a patriot king and believes in the settlement of the glorious revolution is, of course, operating constitutionally through parliament.

And so he cannot do what the colonists want him to do.

So just to hammer that point home, and when you read the Declaration of Independence, indeed, when you go around these places in Boston and stuff, and it's all about the George III versus the colonists, that's actually not really what this is about.

The key to it is the authority of parliament, which for British people is so important, the authority of parliament vis-à-vis the independence of the colonists.

And that is the key battle, isn't it?

It is the key.

For if our trade may be taxed, why not our lands?

Why not the produce of our lands and everything we possess or make use of?

So the Boston merchants meeting in the 1760s.

It's the basic principle that parliament in London, which of course there are no members of parliament sent across the Atlantic from the colonies, that they fundamentally reject the authority of parliament.

And up until the Seven Years' War and its immediate aftermath, while they may have theoretically also rejected the sovereignty of parliament, in practical ways it had never really impinged upon them.

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But it did now, and they really, really, really didn't like it.
So to take the first of these landmark acts, which is the Sugar Act, April 1764,
the extraordinary thing about this is that this,
so this actually cuts the tax on imported molasses.
But the deal breaker is that they beef up the collection of it.
So basically for the first time, the tax is more than nominal.
It's actually going to be properly enforced.
It's the enforcement of it.
It's the regulations and the bureaucracy and all that business.
That is what inflames the colonists, isn't it?
That's right.
And they threaten to send New England merchants to be tried in a vice-admiralty,
in Nova Scotia, without a trial,
which is the way that customs violations are always dealt with in Britain.
There's nothing innovative about this from the point of view of the British government,
but from the point of view of the people in New England,
this violates their ancient rights as Englishmen to always be tried by a jury.
Even in a smuggling case, whereas in a long established precedent in England,
if you're being tried for smuggling, what you don't want is a local jury
to whom you've been supplying them the smuggled goods.
So if you want to tackle smuggling,
you have to have a proper vice-admiralty court without a jury.
But to the New Englanders, this was outrageous
because trial by jury was their basic right as Englishmen.
And so they saw this as a deep violation of everything that they had come to assume
was their rights and the way that they ran their own societies.
Why mess with a system that was working was essentially the colonial reaction.
And are they completely, I mean, presumably at various points,
the British are saying to them,
well, obviously we're doing this because we need all these troops.
We need to pay for all these troops to beat the French,
to keep you safe from the Indians, to allow you to expand, to do all these things.
Is there no sense of any kind of conversation at both sides just not listening to each other or what?
That's such a good question, Dominic.
And I kind of feel reading the history of all of this over this 20-year period of crisis,
that there really isn't a conversation.
These are two sides that are talking past one another,
almost from the beginning and certainly by the end.
And I think that's where the tragedy of this lies, I think.
And the tragedy is that both sides basically are right.
They are both right from their point of view.
They're acting entirely reasonably from their point of view.
I mean, overlaid on this becomes this sense of paranoia on both sides.
But I think it's fair to say, especially on the American side,

this increasing paranoia, which culminates in the declaration of independence with its series of really kind of paranoid, anxious denunciations of the king for things that the king clearly hadn't done in many cases.

And the question is, how do you get to a stage where, by 1776, Americans really believe all this stuff?

They really believe they're being persecuted, that there is some plan to subjugate them, which they manifestly wasn't, but they genuinely believed it.

So one of the answers to that is the introduction of the stamp tax, which is particularly notorious.

And this is what, this is George Grenville again.

And so it's colonists have to purchase special paper for legal documents.

And it's seen as a kind of imposition.

So it particularly affects lawyers and journalists who are bad people to annoy.

A terrible thing to do.

But that's been, but Stamp Act, Tom, has been imposed in England since 1694.

So it's not some terrible innovation.

And so Grenville, when he is introducing it, is, I mean, he points out that people in America are being taxed about a tenth of what people in Britain are being taxed.

And he says the true way to relieve all is to make all contribute their proper share.

So basically he's accusing the Americans of being freeloaders.

Yes. Yes, that is, that is what he thinks.

And there's a famous exchange in the House of Commons as well.

Charles Townsend, he's later to come into the story when he's Chancellor of the Exchequer, talks about these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished up by our indulgence until they're grown to a degree of strength and opulence and protected by our arms, would grudge to contribute their might to relieve us from the heavy weight of that burden, which we lie under.

And the thing about that quote I've just given you compared to yours, Tom, is that there is a tone of arrogance, which when that was read in the colonial press, did not go down well.

And in fact, it was that that speech from Townsend's in the House of Commons was responded to by one of the small number of people in the House of Commons who right from the beginning were strong supporters of the colonial position.

So there was a chap called one of the famous ones was Edmund Burke, who of course was Irish. Another one was Isaac Barré, who was also Irish.

And this may not be coincidence, Barré, I think he was from a Huguenot family.

And Barré, who knew the colonies, unlike most people sitting in the House of Commons, he'd been there and he'd fought in the French and Indian War.

And he responded to Townsend and this famous sort of sarcastic speech, you know, they planted by your care, no, your oppressions planted them in America.

They nourished up by your indulgence. They grew by your neglect of them.

They protected by your arms. They have nobly taken up arms in your defence.

Barré said to the House of Commons and it, you know, and this speech was then reprinted.

He probably didn't sound like a comedy Irishman, actually.

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But that speech was reprinted in the colonies later when Edmund Burke gave his great speeches in the defence of the colonists. They were all reprinted.

I mean, you know, Wilkes Barr in Pennsylvania is named after this guy.

I mean, they loved these. I mean, naturally, you know, these few people in the House of Commons who were saying what they wanted went down very well. But Adam, just to continue, I'm sure, provocatively to our American listeners, sticking up for Grenville.

If there's the risk that the British Parliament's position of principle shades into arrogance, is there not also the sense in which the principles of American colonists shade into hypocrisy?

So I'm thinking of Richard Henry Lee, who, from Virginia,

become one of the founding fathers, signatory to the Declaration of Independence and so on.

And his protest against the Stamp Act is that he gets his slaves to stage a kind of a reenactment of various protests that have been going on in the cities in Virginia against the Stamp Acts.

And they parade effigies of Grenville, who is described as the infamous projector of American slavery.

So this is being reenacted by slaves.

And it then subsequently turns out that Lee himself had applied for the job of stamp distributor in Virginia.

So there's all kinds of hypocrisies to be unpicked there.

But what about the paranoia, Adam, that you mentioned?

I mean, I'm just, when the Sugar Acts and the Stamp Act come in, so in the mid-1760s, the American economy is in a bit of a mess, isn't it, at the end of the war?

That's really important, isn't it? The underlying problem here is the tightening of credit after the war.

And it causes real economic distress.

So that's obviously an element to the anxiety and the anguish and the sense that not only am I worse off than I was before,

but the government's now interfering with me and getting me to fill in these forms and pay these new taxes.

But the level of the paranoia, so the very famous speech by Patrick Henry in the House of Burgesses in Virginia

when he's talking about George III as a new Caesar or a new Charles I.

And this sort of sense of what we would now call a kind of culture war element to it and a sense of incipient tyranny.

And the sort of, where does that come from? Is that to do with the religiosity of America?

Is that because they're still trapped in a very 17th century king versus parliament kind of mindset?

I mean, why is it there? I mean, they've, as you said, they're two inches taller.

They've got all this space. Life is good. Why are they so, why are they so stressed?

One answer is a sort of ideological one, and there are two elements to that.

One is they're all great enlightenment thinkers, and there's some bases to that.

You know, some of them are reading Locke, some of them are reading Montesquieu, not very many of them, obviously, but some of them are.

John Adams certainly is. Thomas Jefferson is.

The other reason, though, and I think perhaps a more important reason is the one that you just

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alluded to there, Dominic,
which is the 17th century British Republican tradition.
I think that's really where this comes from. This deep cent Patrick Henry, who you just mentioned, of course, he was a great orator.
Thomas Jefferson, who didn't like him, said he was a great orator, but Jefferson was a terrible speaker.
But Patrick Henry is one of his most famous greats, of course, was give me liberty or give me death. And that deep sense of the protection of individual rights and liberties, which was as as Englishman. I mean, this was this was their right from the from the 17th century English experience, as you say. And so, Adam, one of the actually the kind of the main response in America to these impositions by from London is the stage boycotts of British goods.
And the really famous example of that is that they refused to import British clothing. And the American women get out their spinning wheels and start making rough homespun and all that kind of thing.
And that presumably is something in New England that would hark back to the idea of the the Puritan Hussif godly, godly housekeeper and so on.
Yes, they're able to do that by drawing on those traditions.
Yes, I think Benjamin Franklin, when he's testifying to Parliament says, and we don't eat lamb anymore.
Because the little the little lambs are all growing fluffy in the field so we can use their fleeces to turn into wool.
So take that.
Yes.
And so this craze for homespun and people, you know, people turning up to the Virginia House of Burgesses and not wearing proper wigs.
That is shocking, baby.
And it's not a massive success in many ways, the non importation movement.
But it's a really interesting because one of the first examples of an attempt to use consumer boycotts to affect political action.
It's always leaky.
There are some very kind of performative gestures, you know, the students at Yale stop importing French wine, the students at Harvard don't drink tea.
And there's this kind of thing goes on.
But what it what it's telling us, of course, he's how is how far the protests against the the sugar acts and the and the stamp acts that we're talking about seeped into colonial society and involved women,
of course, who were the who were the who were the principal consumers in most households in charge of the household budget.
But there are violent protests as well on this.
So there's a famous instant on the 14th of August, 1765, when a mob attacks this guy, Andrew Oliver, who's the stamp distributor from Massachusetts.
And after that point, I mean, they basically intimidate the stamp distributors.
So there's a violence there.
I mean, this is 11 years before the Declaration of Independence.

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And is that violence new?

Or was that I mean, obviously, this is the age of mobs in in England in London.

So is this just par for the course, just standard political kind of stuff.

In fairness, I think this is par for the course.

I mean, if you if you want to make a political point, you gather a mob.

I don't think there's anything that happens in the colonies is anything like on the scale of the Gordon riots in London a few years after the incident that you're talking about.

And you mobs which weren't regarded as unrestrained but were regarded as a man of property and standing making a political point through force was was part of the English Constitution.

And when they when they I mean, you you write about Andrew Oliver, the other incident that happens around the same time is the mob goes to the House of Thomas Hutchinson, who's I think the acting governor of Massachusetts take on and at that time and carefully dismantle his house.

But I mean, carefully, you know, they they put up ladders and they pull the tiles off the roof and they take the paintings out and put them on a bonfire.

But it's not just they're not just firebombing it.

I mean, it's a careful disassembly.

And it does work, doesn't it? Because the Stamp Act gets repealed.

It worked brilliantly.

It is impossible to implement the Stamp Act in the colonies and Parliament repeals it.

Unfortunately, perhaps from the point of view of dealing with this colonial rebellion, they're at the same time pass a Declaratory Act saying, well, although we've repealed the Stamp Act, we nevertheless reserve the right to pass such a thing again.

We're not resiling from the principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

And that's a bit of a poke to the Americans that was perhaps unnecessary.

And the Townsend Acts, so all the things regulating tea and molasses and all that, they are still in place with that.

So that the Townsend duties come in a little bit later.

So that's in 1767 under in a new ministry.

So there's a renewed effort then in 1767.

And after a couple of quieter years, because the same problems still exist, the same revenue challenges still face the British government in London.

So there's a new attempt then not to impose an internal tax like the Stamp duties, which would have affected transactions in everyday life and newspapers and playing cards and all this kind of thing, but to tax imports and exports in a way that was felt to be much better established with much stronger precedent.

But the Townsend duties also then generated strong colonial resistance.

So in the face of this kind of these increasing tensions, there's a request from customs agents in Boston for military assistance.

And two army regiments arrive in Boston in early October 1768.

And intriguingly, they are commanded by someone called William Dalrymple, who I gather is an ancestor of.

The William Dalrymple.

Yes, who presents our sister podcast Empire.

So there he is upholding the British Empire.

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And it all basically kicks off.

So Adam, Massachusetts, what is it specifically, by the way, before we get into the so-called Boston massacre?

What is it specifically about Boston and about Massachusetts that makes it so incendiary?

Because in Britain, everybody basically from this point on would start saying, listen, the colonies are absolutely fine.

It's just that Boston is full of a load of nutters.

And if we can just shut down Boston, then we'll probably be able to shut all this whole business down.

So is there something specific either to Boston or to Massachusetts or indeed to New England?

Well, part of it is because of the economic downturn after the war and that Boston merchants are really feeling the pinch and that they are heavily involved in smuggling imported goods without paying the duties that they're supposed to be paying.

And so Boston is more particularly affected than other port cities.

But it's also perhaps to do with the political culture of Massachusetts and a very, very strongly ingrained sense of self governments and a very articulate political leadership and a press that is quick and articulate and a tradition of mobs in Boston as well, taking to the streets to make political points.

And all of those things together probably push Boston to the fore.

But the British perspective that this is only a Boston and Massachusetts problem is, of course, wrong and is gradually proven to be wrong.

It's incredible how long it takes people in London to realize that.

I mean, even into the war, one of the key military strategies is this attempt to isolate Boston in the hope that that will subdue the rebellion and it doesn't work.

So there are troops pouring into, I mean, these troops, as Tom said, these two regiments that have come, they've actually been transferred from Ireland, I think.

William de Outrempels regiments.

They've arrived in Boston in the autumn of 1768 and anybody who's ever written about or read about a phenomenon where you have troops stationed in a city where they are effectively alien nose, at some point there is going to be a flashpoint.

And actually, in a way, it's surprising it takes so long.

So it's not until the beginning of 1770.

Now, Adam, no doubt like me, you have been to the Boston Freedom Trail.

And you've seen the terrible, you know, the very moving commemorations of the Boston massacre, this scar in the history of our species.

And when the British were conceived of the have absolutely disgracefully.

And yet, when I read about what actually happened in the so-called Boston massacre, that it seems like our brave boys were a little bit hard done by.

Do you want to tell the listeners the true story?

Well, there were a small number of British troops who ended up confronting several hundred local inhabitants of the town.

And there'd been various small episodes that had led up to this in the preceding days.

And words had been banded around and clearly the relations between the red coats, the regular troops and townspeople had not been great.

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Not least because the British troops were underpaid and were needing to find jobs here and there. And so they were actually kind of dependent on the townspeople in some ways and didn't like that dependent relationship as creating constant friction.

And stones were chucked and the accounts always say snowballs were chucked, which never really sounds that bad.

Chucking snowballs.

Bricks inside.

So I noticed that the American accounts very heavily emphasise the snowballs and the British accounts very heavily emphasise stones and cudgels.

Oyster shells.

I think the roads were paved with oyster shells, so they were a very easily available missile to grab up.

But as you say, Dominic, this is a story that we've seen many, many times.

In fact, it happens multiple times in American cities well into the 21st century that whenever you get armed forces confronting unarmed protesters, stuff happens.

And what happens here was that five Bostonians were shot by British troops.

The British account is that the small number of troops massively outnumbered were literally forced against a wall and had to shoot in self-defence.

That was the British account.

And the American account is the opposite, right?

So Paul Revere.

Is it Paul Revere who's the silversmith who does this famous engraving?

Engraving, yes.

Of kind of a line of soldiers mercilessly shooting into these women and children or whatever they are.

But the intriguing detail is that actually, and this is omitted from Paul Revere's illustration of it, is that the leader of the Bostonian freedom fighters or mob or whatever you want to call them is a towering dock worker called Crispus Attucks who is half black, half Native American.

And so he gets omitted from the narrative.

Yeah.

An interesting aftermath of the trial is that John Adams, who we've already mentioned in this discussion, a leader of colonial resistance who's a lawyer, defends the British soldiers in court.

And he does so in order to make the point that we in Boston are not lawless mobs.

We do things by due process.

And even in Boston in this moment in 1770, British soldiers can get a fair trial.

And one of his key lines of defense, Tom, is that he defends the soldiers by saying they were facing a motley rabble of saucy boys, Negroes and mulattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack-tars.

And he puts a lot of the blame specifically on Crispus Attucks, a formerly enslaved man by saying his very look was enough to terrify any person.

So effectively, Adams is saying, look, face with that lot and especially that guy, you know, who can blame the British troops for panicking?

And so what happens?

How do they get off?

Yeah, they do get off Tom.

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Yeah.

Don't they, Adam?

Yeah.

Two of them manslaughter and they get branded on their thumbs and the rest not guilty.

Yeah.

So that's right.

Yes.

They get branded on their thumbs.

Yes.

So at that point, so we're 1770, that's still six years before the Declaration of Independence.

At that point, are we already in a spiral that is going to lead to outright conflict and American independence?

Or, you know, is there, I mean, as we said, there's more violence all the time.

There are lots of dust ups and things on the streets of London.

Actually, could this have just been a footnote in history if things in the next six years have gone differently, Adam?

I think the second, I think what you, I don't think that American independence was unstoppable in 1770.

I think this could have been a footnote.

I think they're an awful, we'd have to imagine and we can talk about this in future episodes.

We'd have to imagine and we'd have to do an awful lot of intellectual work to imagine some quite significantly different things.

It would have to have happened between 1770 and 1776, but I think there was anything inevitable about American independence at this point, not least in the minds of the colonial protesters.

I mean, if you just said to John Adams in 1770, are you on the road to independence?

He would have been appalled.

And same of Washington and Franklin, do you think?

Yeah.

I mean, Washington at this point was just pursuing his own.

I mean, Washington really wasn't engaged in this fight at all up until very late in the game.

It wasn't really until 1775 when he became a member of the Continental Congress that Washington, we don't really know what Washington was thinking.

Presumably he had broad sympathy with the, I mean, we do kind of know because he wrote letters and things.

But I mean, he certainly wasn't the leader of the rebellion at this point.

But no, these people, the colonists at this point were fighting for their rights as Englishmen still.

And they were, it may well be for the reasons that we've been talking about in this episode, that they were doing so on the basis of such a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature, the actual nature of the British constitution, that they were never going to get their way.

But at this point, what they wanted was to have independence of a practical kind of self-governments within the British Empire,

maintaining their allegiance to the King, who they continued to revere.

This episode, of course, in Boston took place on King Street.

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Yeah. So what might have been, and I think on that note, we will end our kind of curtain raiser, our scene setter.

And in the next episode, we will be looking at the road to open war, to the Declaration of Independence, and so on.

That's right. That episode is on Thursday, Tom.

It is on Thursday? Yes.

The Tea Party, the Boston Tea Party, what a shocking moment.

The Battles of Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill.

Shot heard around the world, all that.

Exactly. George III proclaiming American rebellion and the road to the full-scale war.

Now, of course, that will be on Thursday.

If you're a member of the Restless History Club, Tom, what's the good news if you're a member of the Restless History Club?

Well, the good news is that the commercial spirit of the British Empire in the 18th century carries on into the 21st.

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On that bombshell, Adam, we're welcoming you back on Thursday for the next episode.

Thank you so much, as always, and we'll see you all next time. Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

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