

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 348: The Boston Tea Party (Part 2)

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Last night, three cargoes of tea were emptied into the sea. This morning, a man of war sails. This is the most magnificent movement of all.

There is a dignity, a majesty, a sublimity in this last effort of the Patriots that I greatly admire.

The people should never rise without doing something to be remembered, something notable and streaking.

This destruction of the tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important consequences and so lasting that I can't but consider it as an epoch in history.

So, that, Dominic, was John Adams, and we agreed in the previous episode that we've been doing on the American War of Independence that that's exactly how Americans spoke.

They spoke like people from Devon, and he was writing on the 16th of December, 1773, about a tea-related Anglo-American in Broilio.

You may remember that a few months ago, there was great outrage in Britain because an American YouTuber suggested making tea by boiling the water in a microwave, which was shocking and shows that, really, Americans are still up to their tea-related atrocities.

But this is the kind of the primal Anglo-American tea-related bust-up, isn't it? The Boston Tea Party, although it didn't actually get that name for 50 years until after the actual event.

Absolutely right, Tom. Hello, everybody. Welcome back. And just to be absolutely clear, we've done quite a lot of linguistic research, haven't we, Tom?

Yes.

That absolutely is how the founding fathers sounded, and we have an absolute top historian, Oxford Professor Adam Smith, an expert on American history.

And Adam, that's right. Tom's accent was pretty much syllable-perfect. Is that correct?

Spot on. I think, Tom, if anything, we're just speaking a bit too morose-ly, because I think John Adams had a kind of greater sense of drive, but I think the accent was spot on.

OK, well, next time, I'll bear that in mind. So the Boston Tea Party, this exists in the context of everything that we were discussing in the previous episode, the kind of the growing disagreements between the British Parliament and people in colonial America.

And basically, the Colonials and particularly people in New England and particularly Bostonians are fighting back against the attempt by the British government to regulate imperial trade by boycotting British goods.

And the British government have decided that they will kind of reform all the various customs that they'd imposed on various products, including sugar, most notoriously.

But by a majority of one, they vote to keep the duties on tea with calamitous consequences. Have I given the kind of a reasonably accurate summary there?

So we need to talk about the Tea Act of 1773, which wasn't so it wasn't just a matter of retaining the Townsend duties on tea, although it did do that.

The other Townsend duties were repealed, but the one on tea was retained. But the Tea Act of 1773 was not really about America at all.

I mean, it's critical to the story of the coming of the American Revolution and Americans thought it was all about them and really wasn't about them at all.

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What it was actually about was the East India Company, which was in serious financial trouble, falling revenues, huge stockpiles of tea in London warehouses, being a famine in Bengal that had affected its income, falling stock prices, credit crisis. And there were a lot of East India Company people in the House of Commons.

This was deeply entwined with the British state. Basically, the East India Company was too big to fail. They needed a bailout.

The bailout, which seemed like a very clever wheeze to the British government, seemed perfectly sensible, was that the East India Company would be allowed to directly export their India tea to the American colonies and the rest of the British

The Americans saw this as a monopoly. It wasn't formally speaking a monopoly, but in practice it would have enabled East India Company tea to be sold in the colonies at a price that would have undercut smuggled Dutch tea.

So the British government thought this is a solution to all our problems. We allow the East India Company to offload our surplus tea, we provide cheaper tea to the colonies and we do it legally, cutting off smuggling and thus reinforcing the navigation acts.

Problem solved, except it wasn't.

Yeah, why except it wasn't? So the only people who lose out are smugglers, but presumably a lot of colonial Americans involved in smuggling, are they?

They are, but it's also the reassertion of the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. The right of parliament, as parliament saw it, to regulate American affairs, including fundamental issues like import and export.

And that had been the issue that the colonists had been resisting for the previous 10 years or so. So it was another, it was another reassertion of parliamentary supremacy, which the colonists resisted. So on that issue, if we have any American listeners left, which I doubt, they will say in the last episode, you were very hard on the Americans, you know, you saw it very much from London's perspective.

And what we didn't mention, of course, was that they're great sort of a slogan, no taxation without representation.

Yeah.

So if we were taking the American side seriously, they would say, you know, we're not even represented in parliament.

You can say that parliament is sovereign till you're blue in the face, but we don't have a single person in parliament to speak for us.

And you can claim we're virtually represented, but we all know that's a sham. No one cares about our interests.

Yeah.

Do they have a case there, Adam? Is that fair?

They do have a case. They have a very, very strong case. And even the argument about virtual representation, of course, most people in Britain couldn't vote either.

But at least you could say, I mean, you could try to make the case if you wanted to, that members of parliament at least knew their constituents, at least were aware of the issues in their home area.

Whereas that definitely wasn't true for the American colonies, as we said in the previous episode, hardly anybody sitting in the House of Commons had ever been to the colonies.

And they were just a far off remote place where all kinds of assumptions were made, many of which

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were completely wrong.

Yeah.

The colonies definitely did have a very good case. And that slogan, no taxation without representation, was not something they just invented from nothing in the 1760s.

It was deeply rooted in their understanding of English liberties.

And in Britain, presumably, there are people who recognize this and who situate the debate in the kind of the broad traditions of English history as they had flowed over the previous two centuries, all the things that had resulted in the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution and so on.

A feeling that this is an ongoing ideological debate with deep roots in specifically British history. Absolutely. And there were some of them in parliament. And we talked in the last episode about Isaac Paré and Edmund Burke.

There were many outside of parliament, including John Wilkes, who was a famous radical agitator, Thomas Paine, who later became famous after he moved in 1774 to Philadelphia.

But those people represented this country oppositional faction in British politics, for whom the sort of more democratical culture of the American colonies was deeply appealing.

They saw the American colonies as a more purified version of the English Republican tradition, which had been nurtured in the 1640s, and which they worried had become corrupted.

And they weren't wrong to think that.

1770s England was deeply aristocratic place. You read the letters of Lord North and these government ministers and the king, and they're obsessing all the time.

People are constantly petitioning them for titles, and there's all this constant kind of factional politics within this aristocratic world. It was very alien.

Although, Adam, just to reiterate, at this point, so just say on the eve of the Boston Tea Party, is there a mass Republican movement in America drawing on those Cromwellian traditions, or are the vast majority of Americans still loyal to the British Crown?

Well, I suppose I'm using the word Republican there in a kind of loose sense. Of course, later, of course, as you know, Britain becomes even more clearly by the 19th century, a republic with a crime, just as arguably the United States becomes a republic with a monarch in the form of a president with huge prerogative power.

It's not necessarily the case. I mean, certainly isn't the case that people in the colonies, very, very few people in the colonies up until 1774, 1775, are arguing for the creation of an independent republic.

It's perfectly possible within that political tradition to have loyalty to the king, but still think of yourself as functionally Republican, because, of course, the crown of Great Britain was the freest in the world that the world had ever seen up until that time.

And so they, at this stage, are still blaming the king's evil advisors.

They are. They're blaming, they're blaming Parliament and the king for being badly advised.

Right. So to return to the issue of tea, the first tea ship to reach Boston is the Dartmouth, and I think that reaches Boston on the 28th of November, 1773.

And I mean, it sounds like such an abstruse issue, doesn't it? The taxation of tea.

There's a thousand people in Faneel Hall in Boston, kind of shouting and waving bits of paper or whatever they do, doing the opposite of hazards and saying what a terrible business this is.

And basically, they do not want the tea to be unloaded. That's the core thing, isn't it? They don't want the tea, which is in chests, wooden chests, I assume, madam.

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And they just, they won't let it onto the docks. But under the law, you can, you can only stay in the port for 20 days before you have to go or your tea is taxed or there's some sort of weird regulations. And it all comes to a head on the 16th of December, 1773. And why do they, so the famous, I saw a lady by a book illustration when I was about six, which involved people dressed up as Indians, as Native Americans.

Is that true?

I believe it is true. Yes, they blacked their faces and dressed as Mohawks as disguises and boarded the ship. And it was all very orderly. It was one of these kinds of organised mob actions where they took care not to break the locks if they could avoid doing so.

They tried to get the keys to the ship's chests and so on. And their sole purpose was to destroy the tea, which they did. And it was known as the destruction of the tea, about £10,000 worth of tea was destroyed in Boston Harbour that night.

They just chuck it overboard. Very poor respect for the ecology of the, very bad for the family.

But at this point, the lines that we will come to recognise in due course are still a bit scrambled. So Benjamin Franklin, one of the great founding fathers, he describes this as an act of violent injustice. Well, it's a destruction of property. So it really is crossing a line even for many of those who'd been involved in resistance to Britain. You know, many of whom were very conservative figures by most definitions of that word.

And for whom the rights of property was fundamental. That, after all, was the point about no taxation without representation. You can't take my property away unless I have participated in the decision to allow you to do so.

So does that take us to something about the revolutionaries? So your John Adams is or Samuel Adams. And so he's a great sort of agitator in Boston, isn't he? A great agitator for liberty, as Americans would call him.

And all these people who are members of groups like the Sons of Liberty or who, I don't know, what do they call them? Correspondence Committees.

And they're all writing letters to people in Rhode Island or whatever they're doing. I mean, if that's how you, you know, get your kicks crack on as far as I'm concerned. But they're doing all that.

Now, are they the propertied conservative classes? In other words, are they the establishment, as it were? Or are they subversives, these people?

Well, they are. Most of these people are definitely the propertied classes, yes. They're merchants and they're landowners. And they're people who've been used to running their own affairs. And that's the fundamental problem.

And in the South, there's a similar group of people in Virginia, and they're all own plantations and enslaved people. And these are the literate, sometimes highly educated, very articulate members of colonial society.

And is it the case that as they find their material interests threatened, are they kind of scouting around for ideological justifications for that that is something more than just it's our it's our commercial interests that are being damaged?

Or is that too cynical a view of it?

I think it is too cynical a view of it. Yes, I think they certainly did want to defend their material interests. But I think I wouldn't want to imply there's anything insincere when they protested that their liberties were being trampled on by the British government.

Right. And British response to the Boston Tea Party, does it make these feelings kind of worse,

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throwing kind of petrol on the fire?

It really does. I mean, this is the point. And the reason why the Boston Tea Party, the destruction of the tea as it was known at the time, is rightly remembered as a key staging post to revolution is because of the reaction in London was so severe.

And this is where we're getting to the point by 1774, where Dominic asked me at the end of the first episode if I thought by 1770 independence was inevitable.

And I said no, I didn't think it was by 1774, we're getting, we're getting into stickier territory by the time the British government hears about the destruction of the tea and responds to it with a series of quite punitive pieces of legislation.

And these are the coercive acts as they're called. What's the Americans call them? The intolerable acts.

The intolerable acts.

And these were, when we come on to talking about the Declaration of Independence, you'll see that a lot of the grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence actually relate to the coercive acts, which of course makes it all a little bit circular.

So the Declaration of Independence is castigating it by that stage, 1776, the king for actions which the British government took in response to a rebellion that was already in the British government's mind already happening.

But the coercive acts included a bill which overrode the Massachusetts Bay Charter, brought the colony under the direct control of London, limited town meetings.

I mean, these are very serious things. I mean, this is, this really is a quite extreme set of actions. It wasn't completely unprecedented.

And the British government had interfered in colonial charters back in the past, but in this context. But have they done anything similar to say to rebellions in, within Britain itself? Or is this seen as being something that is purely colonial?

Policymakers in London were of course always thinking about the rebellion that appeared to be brewing in at least some of the colonies in North America in the context of the British Empire more widely.

And weapons were being stockpiled in Ireland at the same time. And part of the worry on the part of the British government was the classic kind of domino theory.

If we let these colonies go, who will be next? And that's what they kept on saying.

An island was expected to be next. Ireland, of course, had its own parliament at this point in Dublin. So there were lots of parallels between the government of Ireland and the government of the colonies.

And in fact, Charles Townsend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer who unwisely levied a lot of duties on the American colonies, which had since been repealed,

his brother was the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland at the same time.

So the two Townsend brothers were both involved at the same moment in trying to deal with what seemed to point to a very parallel colonial challenge.

The most popular brothers in the British Empire.

But actually, you know, we did a series about the history of Ireland. Adam and we ended up by doing the Easter Rising with Paul Rouse.

And there are so many things in that story, in this story, that there are so many interesting resonances.

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So there are moments of what you might see as sort of imperial metropolitan overreaction. But the people who are administering that say, well, we have no choice because if we don't do this, we will look weak.

And so Lord North actually says after the Boston Tea Party, we are now to establish our authority or give it up entirely.

Whatever may be the consequence, we must risk something because if we do not, all is over.

I mean, he basically is the prisoner of events.

He says, I can't just say, oh, we threw our tea in the harbour.

This colossal, because is it 10,000 pounds, did you say?

Which is an enormous sum of money.

I mean, a massive sum of money.

He can't say, oh lads, that was bad behavior.

But you know, steady on.

Yeah, forgive and forget.

I mean, he obviously thinks, well, we absolutely have to do something.

And I suppose it goes back to the point that you were making the first episode.

The American colonies are not the most valuable colonies to the British.

So they think we have to make an example in these kind of, in these colonies now.

Because if this spreads to more valuable colonies, then that would be disastrous.

Isn't that basically that position?

Yes.

Yes, I think it is.

And there's a, I mean, for Lord North, who had previously not been a hardliner particularly at all, and indeed for the king who backs Lord North and kind of keeps on stopping him trying to resign, as poor old Lord North keeps on trying to do throughout the war in the coming years.

And the king is up until this point not being a hardliner at all.

But the Boston Tea Party tips them both into saying, exactly as you just said, Dominic, sorry, this is actually, we can't put up with this, because at stake here is this fundamental issue of sovereignty.

Lord North actually says in the House of Commons, when the destruction that he becomes known, that the Americans are acting as if they were an independent empire.

And they're not.

But he's put his finger on it there.

They are acting as if they're an independent state.

And they are also saying that, you know, so, you know, Thomas Jefferson's comes into the story at this point, because he writes his summary view of the rights of British America in 1774, basically says Jefferson says, the colonies are already independent in practice.

So he's still referring to them as British Americans, even at this point?

Yes, still referring to the British Americans.

And he's not Jefferson.

He's not at this point arguing directly for independence.

He's saying, we've already got independence.

We've got it.

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We've always had it.

And well, that's not the view in London.

So Jefferson's vision of empire, as late as 1774,

appears to be this very loose confederation under the auspices of the British monarchy, in which there are self-governing dominions.

And of course, that is, in fact, a model that the British Empire later adopts,

and is to adopt, for example, in Canada at various points late in the war in 1778.

He's pretty much what the British government offered the Americans by then it's too late.

But in 1774, that's what they are effectively asking for.

Can I just ask about people like Jefferson Adams and so on?

Sam Adams, Benjamin Franklin, if you had said to them,

okay, point taken, you know, no representation, no taxation.

Parliament is not sovereign over you.

You have your independence.

However, how are you going to defend yourselves against the Native Americans and maybe the Spanish or the French comeback?

What's your plan for that?

Who's going to pay for the troops?

How would they have answered that question?

They would have said, we'll do it ourselves.

Leave it to us.

We are free self-governing entities.

Is it at this point that the kind of the idea of American colonists as ancient Romans, kind of hardy farmers who till the land and then take up their weapons to defend their farmsteads, is this starting to kick in at this point?

The idea that America is somehow nobler, purer, you know, hasn't been corrupted by the poison of empire and luxury?

Yes, definitely.

And they've got recent experience.

They've got plenty of experience.

I mean, they have, you know, the militia, the military,

the colonial militias have been very active for many decades

and they're used to fighting their own wars against Native Americans.

And it's certainly true that in the Seven Years' War,

they had to do so alongside regiments of British redcoats

and there was a lot of tension between the two.

But it was really, you know, during the war, there was this sense, even then,

a lot of people in the colonies saying,

look, we don't need you.

We don't need your regiments.

We can deal with this ourselves.

It wasn't actually true, but there was a lot of feeling.

Okay, so to turn that on its head, why did the British government not say,

okay, well, you know, we'll get rid of all the 10,000 troops that we've got.

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You look after, you know, you look after yourselves.

We subcontract defense of America to Americans.

I think that's a really good question, Tom.

And the thing is in the end that the British government faced with the prospect of losing the 13 colonies do pretty much say that, but by then it's too late.

I think it would have been pretty hard for the British government to go quite as far as saying, well, you look after your own defense,

given the kind of ongoing anxiety about a resurgence of the French and Spanish influence and the other ways in which left to their own devices,

the colonists would have provoked wars with Indigenous peoples,

which inevitably would have drawn in the British taxpayer in one form or another, so long as they were part of the British Empire.

But that sentiment is there.

Look, just let them get on with it.

And there are, as I've said, there are people in the House of Commons even who are saying that.

And one of the things that kind of intensifies this sense of American hostility

towards what is seen as an alliance between the British government

and what they would call Indians, savages,

people who have to be tamed in the way that Americans see it

is the Quebec Act, which basically gives freedom of religion to French Catholics,

but it also extends the boundaries of Quebec kind of further south into New England.

And so you have people who, it's Joseph Reed, who is a Philadelphia lawyer,

who says that this act is bringing down the Canadians and savages upon the English colonies, and he describes it as odious and dreadful and cruel and unnatural.

The Coercive Acts, the Massachusetts Government Act and the Administration of Justice Act, which meant that the trials of royal officials could take place elsewhere,

and the Boston Port Act, which closed the port of Boston, those are the Coercive Acts.

But when the Americans referred to the Intolerable Acts, they added to that list the Quebec Act.

It's difficult to underestimate the importance of anti-Catholicism in generating this sense of antagonism.

This notion that you would privilege, I mean, they talked about establishing the Catholic religion, which was an overstatement, that wasn't actually what the Quebec Act did,

but it did allow the Catholic Church to collect tithes.

It was an essential pragmatic piece of good government from London

because you had this fairly large population of French Catholics,

and it was an extremely successful piece of legislation as well because there was no significant revolt.

That's what I say, Adam's incredible.

Quebec's still there. I mean, Quebec is still loyal.

Exactly. So it was tremendously successful, the Quebec Act was empty before.

But the Americans, as you rightly say, Tom, saw it as evidence of the complete corruption of the British Government

and the Catholicization of the British Government.

And Paul Revere, the illustrator who we talked about in the last episode,

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who's probably most famous, if people have seen any image by him, it's probably the one of the Boston Massacre, so-called, of the British Redcoats opening fire, but he also published a sort of cartoon called The Miter Minuet, which is a kind of anti-Catholic depiction of Church of England bishops in kind of conclave, in this kind of sinister witch-like conclave.

So he was busy spreading this idea that the Catholicism was coming alongside the alleged authoritarianism that had completely corrupted English liberty.

And that is pure 1630s, 1640s kind of propaganda, isn't it?

I mean, it's almost preserved in Aspic.

But also this idea that the British are secretly plotting to bring in Native Americans against them.

I mean, it's exactly the language of the parliamentarians about the Irish in the English Civil War.

And the territorial issue as well, Tom, that you rightly say.

So the other thing the Quebec Act did was to greatly expand the boundaries of the province of Quebec

in a way that, so it meant that they, especially the New Englanders,

but also the New Yorkers and the Pennsylvanians, felt that they were being hemmed in yet again by this unholy alliance of Catholics and Native Americans.

So just before we go to the break, Adam, let's end this half with the...

They're all agitated.

They're in a terrible lather about all of these things, Catholicism, Indians, tea, taxes.

And they call for a Congress of representatives from all across the colonies,

which becomes known as the First Continental Congress, which meets the following September 1774 in Philadelphia.

I think every colony sends representatives, but Georgia, is that right?

Because Georgia is the smallest, the newest, and the most loyal.

Have I got that?

Have I got that right?

Furthest away as well.

Furthest away.

Okay.

And what does the Continental Congress do?

What's the point of it?

It's a significant that it's called the Continental Congress, by the way, as well.

There had been a Stamp Act Congress, but Continental Congress is pretty aspirational.

There's the whole continent supposedly being represented.

It meets to coordinate the colony's response to the intolerable acts.

Okay.

Very good.

So we end on this extraordinary cliffhanger, as Adam's going to sell us, what the Continental Congress did.

Don't go away.

It's a big discussion, Dominic.

We've never had a more thrilling cliffhanger in the history of the Restless History.

So we'll see you after the break.

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Welcome back to the Restless History, one of the most thrilling cliffhangers we have ever known.

Adam Smith is going to tell us what the Continental Congress did and what it was all about.

Adam, what a buildup.

Take it away, please.

It's really exciting, this.

They adopted the Suffolk Resolves.

Whoa.

Get in.

So tell us about a series of resolutions that were drawn up by Suffolk County, Massachusetts, which I think is the county that includes Boston, condemning the intolerable acts, encouraging non-importation, pledging no obedience to the Massachusetts Government Act, which had closed all the courts, and urged colonists to stop pile weapons.

They started contacting ammunition traders in Holland and Spain and started bringing weapons in.

In other words, it was the moment when the colonists started formally and explicitly preparing for armed resistance.

So John Adams agrees with you.

He thinks this was a tremendous moment as well, because he called it one of the happiest days of my life.

And actually, Gordon Wood, in his short account of the American Revolution, he also says this is the point at which there is nothing the British could have done.

So what do the British do?

After the Continental Congress, my rights in saying there are all kinds of vigilante groups and local committees, and many Gordon Wood's description, he says people are going around tarring and feathering loyalists if they are not.

There's a kind of violence and intimidation into the story in a really significant way from this point onwards.

How much do you agree that a lot of this stuff is actually a lot of that people are settling local grievances and things, and there's all kinds of, I don't know, local bigwigs who have feuded for years, and now this is their chance to kind of outflank each other, and how much is that driving things?

There's a lot of that.

And it's an old, let's say, historian more than 100 years ago now.

He said the issue of the American Revolution was not so much who should rule, but who should rule at home.

And so this is a highly fragmented society in lots of ways across race and ethnic boundaries and obviously class, and there are an awful lot of tensions and issues that are being worked out in the context of this crisis.

Made worse by the fact that you've closed, in places like Massachusetts, you've closed all the courts.

Royal governments are ceasing to function across the 13 colonies by the end of 1774, which is why this is really now has now reached a point where it's difficult.

It's really hard to see how it could have been de-escalated effectively, especially

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given the fact that in London, even some of those people like Isaac Barray and Edmund Burke, who had been the friends of America, had supported the coercive acts.

Even they had said, yeah, we cannot have this destruction of the tea.

We've got to do something.

We've got to make a stand.

So the Americans were losing their friends in London at the same time that the British were losing their friends in America.

But Adam, in the first episode, you talked about how in London there is a sense that the peculiar hotbed of rebellion in North America is New England and that perhaps if you could ring fence that off, then you could stop the flames of rebellion spreading.

And is that why in February 1775, it specifically Massachusetts that is declared to be in rebellion?

Yes, they still think in London that Massachusetts is the real problem.

If you can quarterize the rebellion in Massachusetts, there is an underlying level of loyalism across the colonies, which will come to the fore as long as you can isolate the rebels.

And is that not true, Adam?

Fundamentally, it isn't true.

At least it's not nearly as true as they need it to be for their strategy to work.

Right.

John Adams famously, and he's still always quoted as saying this,

John Adams later says that he thinks the colonial population, a third of them were loyalists, a third of them were patriots, and a third couldn't decide.

I think that's, in a way, that's slightly self-serving to him.

It makes the Patriots' achievements seem greater.

I mean, it may be that a third of the population in some colonies in the south remained actively loyal to the king.

And if you include enslaved people in their loyal population, then you probably do get to about a third.

But in Massachusetts, you struggle to find evidence that a third of the white population of Massachusetts were loyal in the sense of actively maintaining their loyalty to the royal government of Massachusetts by the 1774.

And so in Massachusetts, the governor of Massachusetts is also the commander-in-chief of all the British forces in North America, a man called Thomas Gage.

Become so, yes, Thomas Gage, yes.

And so he's a veteran of the Seven Years War, he's fought in America, very brave man, but is starting to be criticized as, quote, unquote, an old woman.

Yes, weak.

It's seen as being weak.

And so there's a kind of agitation on the part of the British Imperial Authorities for a bit of action, you know, show the rebels a bit of stick.

So what happens next?

Gage is the man who says, well, the first thing you've got to do, quite logically, is to gather up the rebels' weapons.

And so there's an armaments depot outside of Boston and Cambridge, which the British regulars seize.

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And then they march off to Lexington and Concord.
And this is the moment when it all starts.
And so this is the famous thing where Paul Revere, who we've talked about before, is supposed to go galloping off, shouting, the British are coming.
Although he wouldn't have said the British are coming, because at this point still, the rebels see themselves as British as well, still at that point, right?
They do, but I think probably by this point, I don't know whether he literally said the British are coming, but I think by this point, the British was coming to be associated with the regular troops in Boston.
And that was what made Boston a very particular case, because the British had become aliens within the city because of the presence of the regular troops.
But that's, you know, midnight ride of, this and my children in usual here are the midnight ride of Paul Revere.
I mean, this is, that's the Longfellow poem, isn't it, from I think 1861.
But it becomes, I think it's still part of, you know, American folklore.
This is when the first shots were fired, so Revere was shot, heard around the world, shot, heard around the world.
I think that's, that's Emerson, isn't it? Who called it that?
So that's what, so Concord is about 17 miles from Boston.
Yeah.
They've marched out General Gage's men to get these guns, and they're met first on the common Lexington, I think.
That's where the shot happens.
It's not a Concord, it's a Lexington.
Yeah.
And there's about 17 militiamen.
And it's all, the funny thing about all of these encounters, so I was reading up about this and the Seven Years' War, which had preceded it.
So in the Seven Years' War in Europe, there were these colossal battles with kind of, you know, you can see them on Wikipedia or something.
It'll say sort of Prussian troop strength, 60,000 men.
And these inverted commas battles, there's kind of three men and a dog.
I mean, they're kind of 70 militiamen here, 100 redcoats there.
They're all, it's all a bit, I mean, there have been football hooligan fights that have been bigger than this, haven't they?
Right, but in the Seven Years' War, and indeed in football hooligan fights, people want to get stuck in.
And there is a sense even now that neither side really wants to engage.
So I was reading Woody Houlton's book Liberty is Sweet, and he says of the Battle of Lexington that it would not have occurred if the officers leading the British column had known that the colonists would determine

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not to be the aggressors.

Yeah.

Because they are anxious about exposing their flank.

You never expose your flank.

But it would have been fine for the British to do that.

You know, they're confronted by the rebels.

They need to turn around.

They can't risk doing that because they're afraid that the rebels will shoot.

The rebels aren't going to shoot because they don't want to fight.

And so the British then fire at the rebels.

So it's all a bit of a shambles, and then they go on to Concord,

which is further on from Lexington, I think it's now Adam.

And there's a bridge, some of them go across a bridge,

and it's all a bit more shouting and scuffling and firing.

And this is where the first British soldiers get shot by rebels.

And then the British fall back.

So I read that there are militiamen,

new England militiamen, sort of firing at them as they fall back towards Boston.

So these militiamen, Adam, have they always been there?

Have they been sort of drummed up especially for the revolutionary crisis, or are they part of colonial life?

They're part of colonial life.

But the militia units have been drilling and preparing in the preceding couple of years for this kind of conflict.

Right.

And so by the end of the day, 65 British, I think 50 Americans, if Gordon Wood is right, which I'm sure he is, are dead.

And the British go back to Boston, and they basically now realize we are in enemy territory.

They kind of hold up in the city.

And the countryside has risen.

The place is teeming with sort of militiamen and whatnot.

And I guess it's not long after that, it's about a month after that, that we have the second Continental Congress.

So the first one was very exciting.

This is even more exciting, isn't it?

Well, the second one is more exciting.

They're still talking about loyalties to the king, though, incredibly at this point.

But they decide they need an army.

And why Washington as the commander, Adam?

Washington was, I think he was six foot four.

He had an air of command.

Whenever anyone wrote about Washington, they always said,

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my, he was a fine figure of a man, especially on a horse.
You know, he looked the part.
Although his teeth, his forced teeth kind of bolt out, don't they?
So he does have a problem with them.
But that doesn't detract from the overall sense of thinking.
As long as he keeps his mouth shut then, he's a fine figure of a man.
He obviously has military experience.
We talked about him already in the first episode in the Seven Years War,
not grand military experience, but he has military experience.
And also he's from Virginia.
And the underlying issue here, which we've sort of touched on,
is that it's really difficult for these 13 colonies to come together.
They're not used to doing this.
They only do it in the face of extreme threat.
And they're all deeply suspicious of one another.
There's supposedly a moment in the Second Continental Congress
where John Adams gets up to nominate someone to head the new Continental Army.
And he starts talking without mentioning the name,
but this fine figure of a man with great military experience.
And John Hancock from Massachusetts, the president of the Congress,
thinks he's going to nominate him.
So he's sitting there kind of pre-expecting, expecting.
He's going to say me.
And John Adams then said, and the man is George Washington.
And Hancock looks utterly few.
But the reason why John Hancock would not have been the right man for the job
is nothing to do with Hancock's military prowess,
but to do with the fact that he was also a New England man.
So it was important politically,
and this continued with the case right through the war,
it's important politically that different regions and their interests
within the colonies were balanced.
So that was a lot of the reason for Washington initially.
His great strength, Washington, is that he realizes
they're never going to win a conventional war.
That's right, isn't it?
He knows that he's quite a sort of..
Well, I get the sense it takes him time to appreciate that.
And that actually the British come to understand that sooner than the Americans do,
for reasons that relate to the next stage of the conflict in Boston,
which is the Bunker Hill campaign.
But I guess the fascinating thing, Adam,
I mean, this, Tom's point takes us to the real,
for those people who are interested in kind of military strategy and stuff,

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the fascinating thing here.

So this is always presented as this great underdog victory.

You know, the Americans, they've got their face in this tremendous empire, what a great triumph the human spirit over the kind of the mechanical, you know, brutality of this massive power.

But actually the British are in a mess from the beginning, aren't they?

Absolutely. Yes, it really isn't like that at all.

I mean, you're absolutely right.

This is the conventional analysis.

There's the world's greatest empire, huge military force, how on earth can these plucky, rag bad colonials take them on and win?

And quite aside from the fact that they have the aid of the French,

which we'll no doubt will come on to,

and the challenge for the British is absolutely enormous.

I mean, they've got no functional command and control structure.

There's four different departments in London in charge of sending ships and supplies over.

They can't rely on, what do you do about horses?

You know, they initially think where you can forage and find horses in New England,

that becomes very difficult because you just rightly say Dominic,

it's effectively enemy territory.

So to bring everything across from London,

it takes two months to cross the Atlantic.

They have no idea what's going on.

And you are tiny, you remain a tiny, I mean, even at the height of the war,

the British force is tiny, given the scale of the challenge ahead of them.

There's no colonial capital, which they can easily...

I mean, there is Philadelphia, but Philadelphia falls and so what?

It doesn't make any difference.

So a lot of the rules of warfare that the British have been used to don't apply.

It's incredibly difficult.

Reading the British High Command in the early months and then years of the war,

it reminds me of the episode, Dominic, that we did on the fall of Saigon,

the challenge that faces the American military in dealing with a highly motivated guerrilla force.

So there is a British general is posted to America by the name of John Burgoyne,

and he scans the terrain and he describes it as being full of woods,

swamps, stone walls and other enclosures and hiding places.

And then he draws the logical conclusion that the rebel fighters can turn every tree

and bush into a kind of temporary fortress from whence.

When he had fired his shot with all the deliberation, coolness and certainty,

which hidden safety inspires, he will skip as it were to the next.

So the British, even as the war is starting, understand that if the Americans do a guerrilla war,

i.e. don't come and meet them in kind of full-scale seven-year war battles,

then they're almost certainly doomed.

And probably what enables the war to go on so long as I understand it is that actually

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it takes Washington and the American High Command quite a while to understand that.
But also, isn't there a political issue, Adam?
I mean, even if you do beat them, say what?
I mean, you've got to win them over to the...
This is the problem that all imperial powers, yeah, the hearts and minds.
And they use that phrase.
They talk about that phrase, hearts and minds.
The British generals and politicians right to each other use that.
They understand they've got to win over the hearts and minds of the Americans.
And the battle that illustrates this is the Battle of Bunker Hill, right?
That this involves an attempt by the British to take back the kind of commanding heights beyond Boston.
So it requires them to enable landing.
There are various hills that have been fortified.
And the British do end up taking their targets, but at incredible cost.
Credible cost, yes.
I think about a third of the 3,000 British troops who were engaged in the Battle of Bunker Hill were casualties.
That's obviously an unsustainable loss.
Relatively small force, but an unsustainable loss.
And so it's one of those victories that actually sends the message that this is going to be really, really hard.
It's a pirate victory.
Well, one of the British soldiers says afterwards,
never had the British army so ungenerous an enemy to oppose.
What an unfair method of carrying on a war.
And he complains that the Americans have been hiding behind trees for the British bullets.
Well, this seems to be run in peace.
This seems very poor behavior.
But actually, I mean, again, just to repeat, in the opening months, what is striking is that this is not the strategy that the Americans are taking as a matter of course.
Well, I suppose they're all feeling their way, though, aren't they, Tom?
Of course.
They don't know how the war is going to play out.
Of course.
I suppose to some extent as well, have there been wars like this before,
where an imperial metropolis has tried to discipline a rebellious colony?
I mean, obviously, it's a kind of war.
The Romans.
I suppose the Romans, I mean, far back in history.
This kind of war that we're very familiar with now, Vietnam.
But actually, Roman analogies are kind of bubbling around all over the place here,
both in Britain and in America.
It's when Gibbon is writing the decline of all of the Roman Empire,

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and he definitely is influenced by events in America while he's doing it. But one of the reasons why the British do not adopt a Roman strategy, a Roman strategy against rebels, you would annihilate a city.

You would torch it.

You would enslave the inhabitants.

The British, when confronted, say, with rebellions in Ireland or rebellions in India, or indeed even more so in the Caribbean, can be incredibly brutal.

But they choose not to, do they?

I mean, they don't kind of bring in the Royal Navy and bombard Boston, because there is a feeling still that these are Archith and Kin.

These are Protestant.

These are of English stock.

We can't treat them as we would treat, say, rebellious slaves in Jamaica.

That's a really, really important point, Tom.

That's absolutely key to the whole thing.

And the Spanish in Louisiana have a place of rebellion in the 1760s, and they put it down very, very brutally.

It's quite different.

There were lots of options that could have been available, as you say, using the Royal Navy in a different way.

The British had really, really wanted to subdue the 13 colonies and had been prepared to divert the resources, which they clearly were never going to do, from the defense of the sugar islands in the Caribbean and other places, and hadn't had this sense that they were fundamentally fighting the same people. The war would have looked very different from how it did look.

Well, in his biography of George III, which came out about a year ago, two years ago, Andrew Roberts makes the point, he says, they accused him of being a tyrant.

But had he been a tyrant, he would have won.

He would have won.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So, Bunker Hill, incredibly peeric victory for the British, and it's at that point, or just shortly afterwards, 23rd of August, the George III proclaims the entire 13 colonies in open rebellion, just before we get onto what then happens after that.

So, it's 13 colonies along that kind of Atlantic seaboard.

Why do other colonies, so you said there were 26, why do other colonies not join them?

Why only 13?

So, it's one of the great frustrations of the New Englanders

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throughout this period of tension that the Caribbean islands don't. One answer may simply be the huge preponderance of enslaved people of color in Jamaica and Barbados and Antigua, making it harder for them to talk about liberty or give me liberty or give me death. The population of in South Carolina, there was a small majority of people of color of enslaved people. In Virginia, I think it was about 40% in the 1770s. So, one explanation would be that was a sort of Goldilocks number. In Virginia, you could talk about liberty without thinking that you are going to immediately be overwhelmed by a slave rebellion. So, I think that may be part of the explanation, because certainly the stamp act and the sugar duties, not so much the sugar duties, but certainly the stamp act was resented in the Caribbean as well. And Canada is a different matter. I mean, the Canadian and Quebec we've already talked about. I mean, there's a whole different set of issues in Quebec where the British government was separately sorting out and appeared to have done so with the Quebec Act. And then it's a matter of concentrations of population. These were long and well-established communities in most cases. There was an interesting hypothetical question about whether Georgia could have needed to be included in the 13. There was a possibility that it might not have been. Georgia was a tiny place, but had a kind of a relatively new population of poor whites who wanted to be slaveholders and wanted to be more like South Carolina. So, they were going to throw their lot in with their neighbors to the North. So, Adam, on that topic of you talking about slaves, I mean, this in a way is a kind of key part of what is going on, because one of the things that the British obviously recognize is that people who are kept as slaves in plantations are potentially very rebellious. They know this because they have been suppressing slave rebellions in Jamaica, most notoriously. And so, they are aware that if they can persuade slaves in plantations, say, in Virginia to rise against their owners, then this is tremendous. This is a real opportunity for a fifth column. And so, in November 1775, the governor of Virginia, the royal governor, the British governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, issues a proclamation. And I'm aware that the exact status of this proclamation is very, very controversial at the moment in American historiography. But just to read Woody Holton again, Liberty is Sweet.

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He says of this declaration, which is basically an emancipation proclamation. And Holton compares it overtly to Lincoln's emancipation proclamation almost a century later.

He says of this, no other document, not even Thomas Paine's Common Sense, which kind of is the rallying cry for rebellion against the king, or the Declaration of Independence, did more than Dunmore's proclamation to convert white residents of Britain's most populous American colony to the cause of independence.

In other words, the attempt by the British authorities to get slaves, to rebel against their owners and decide with the British, irrevocably turns white Virginians against British rule.

Do you think that that's true or not?

Well, just to jump in before Adam issues what I can sort of tell from his face a withering answer.

This is also a key contention not just to Woody Holton, Tom, but of this 1619 project set up by The New York Times, which argues that the story of slavery has been slightly sort of erased from the American Revolution, and that at least in part, the American revolutionaries were motivated by desire to preserve slavery and they feared British abolitionism.

Now, Adam, I know this is intensely controversial among historians, but since we're on the Dunmore proclamation, how much truth is there in what Tom has just described?

Well, I know Abraham Lincoln.

I can't say I work with Abraham Lincoln, but I can tell you the Lord Dunmore is no- The Lord Dunmore was no-

The Lord Dunmore was no Abraham Lincoln.

Well, because we should say that after this, he then goes to become, I think, Governor of Barbados, where he notably does not free a single slave.

So, yes.

I think that is too much of a stretch if Woody Holton compares directly the Dunmore proclamation with Abraham Lincoln proclamation.

I think that's just far too much of a stretch.

It is definitely true.

There's plenty of evidence, and Woody Holton is one of those historians who provided the evidence that in Virginia, and no doubt also in the Carolinas, there were plenty of slaveholding white men, which is to say everybody really, who we think of when we're thinking about the revolutionary leadership, who were appalled by the Dunmore proclamation.

James Madison said,

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if we should be subdued, we shall fall like Achilles
by the hand of one that knows that secret,
meaning we have slaves.
I mean, it wasn't much of a secret.
But he was very overt.
Edward Rutledge of South Carolina said that the Dunmore proclamation
did more effectually work an eternal separation
between Great Britain and the colonies
than any other expedient,
which could possibly have been thought of.
I mean, these people were appalled, utterly appalled,
by what seemed to be the utter desperation
of Dunmore's willingness to, I mean, you talked, Dominic earlier,
talked about how outrageous it was
that the Americans were firing from behind trees.
I mean, this, from the Americans' point of view,
this was not cricket.
I mean, you did not do this.
You did not go there.
So both sides are cheating in the views of the other.
But I mean, just to go back to this idea,
which has been much brooded by the New York Times recently,
and so it's a very live issue in American public discourse
at the moment.
The sense in which the talk of liberty
on the part of white rebels against British rule
is compromised by the fact that many of the leaders
of this rebellion are themselves slave owners.
This is not just a kind of,
this is not just 21st century wokery.
This is something that is pointed out at the time.
The paradox of people talking about,
you know, so Thomas Jefferson,
for instance, who will write the first draft
of the Declaration of Independence,
he describes Virginians like him being turned
into a species of property
annexed to certain mercantile houses in London,
i.e. directly saying we are like slaves.
But back in London,
and indeed among loyalist circles in America,
you have people pointing out the hypocrisy of this.
So the most famous person who does this
is Samuel Johnson, Dr. Johnson, the great lexicographer,

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who in a pamphlet Taxation of Tyranny published in 1775, I think, while all this is going on. Yes. He famously says, how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes? And as a result of that is, I think, the only British writer to have been burnt in effigy in Boston. So there is, I mean, these are part of the propaganda war that is going on in 1775, as well as in 2023. Edmund Burke to decide him again in a speech to parliament says, look, these Americans, they are very hypersensitive. They're really prickly. We know this. There are two reasons for this, and they're good reasons. One is that they're devoted to liberty according to English ideas on English principles and probably more devoted to liberty than we are now. And we should learn from them because they are what we used to be. But the second reason why they're hypersensitive is because they have slaves. And Burke says, those who are free are by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom if they have enslaved people. I mean, that's his core point. That's the difference between them and us. Right. So everything is now set up for the Titanic conflict that is to come. So in our next episode, our third episode, we will look at how the war begins. We'll look at the Declaration of Independence. And we will see what the course of war is. So we will see you on Monday, when we Dominic.

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Unless, of course.

Less.

Unless, is there something that...

Yeah.

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