

Institutional Divergence and the Inevitability of the American Revolution: A Comparative Analysis of British and Colonial Political Structures

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Abstract. The American Revolution did not begin with a single tax dispute or a short-lived problem of imperial administration. It was caused by a deep incompatibility between the two constitutional systems in the empire at that time. Eighteenth-century Britain increasingly considered parliamentary sovereignty indivisible and legally unrestricted, while the North American colonies had established elected assemblies, local taxation and customary practices of self-government that were regarded as constitutional rights. By comparing the institutions and history of both Britain and the colonies, this study examines the conflicts among their parliaments, trade regulations, etc., and explores why the empire fell. Based on the above analysis, the findings reveal that the fiscal measures introduced after 1763 were indeed far-reaching, they transferred actual governing power from the colonies to Britain without establishing colonial representation or forming a common-law division of powers. The Declaratory Act, the Townshend Acts and the Coercive Acts made disputes over policy disputes about the location of legitimate authority. By 1774, peaceful adjustment would require Parliament to waive its claim to authority in all cases or for the colonies to relinquish the autonomy gained through political experience. Neither side had an institution that could give such a concession legal force. Therefore, the Revolution was not inevitable from the start, rather, it became structurally unavoidable when constitutional compromise failed to provide an enforceable and legitimate solution.

Keywords: American Revolution, parliamentary sovereignty, colonial self-government, institutional conflict, constitutional development

1. Introduction

The causes of the American Revolution have long been explained by ideas, economics, political culture and imperial administration. Republican and natural-rights ideas provided the colonists with a strong sense of resistance, but they did not explain why there was conflict. It was due to institutions. Both British and colonial constitutional systems were uncoded and mixed, built on statutes, precedents and local conventions [1]. For a long time, imperial law balanced institutional uniformity and regional diversity. The crisis erupted only when Britain redefined colonial institutional divergence as political subordination. The two sides held contradictory interpretations

of colonial assemblies' authority: Britain viewed assemblies as delegated subordinate bodies, while colonists recognised long-standing local governance practices as the source of constitutional power.

Bailyn's ideas suggest that the colonists were afraid of losing their freedom under centralisation of power [2]. Constitutional scholars have also pointed out that the colonial protests were based on inherited legal arguments and established government practices, not a sudden uprising [3, 4]. Research on British political culture has also found that the imperialisation after the Seven Years' War demonstrated metropolitan ideas of order, finance and national power [5].

This paper analyzes the core political divides between Britain and its American colonies, explores the legislative and trade disputes stemming from these divides, and examines how such factors rendered colonial separation inevitable. It adopts comparative institutional analysis and conducts close textual readings of key statutes and constitutional declarations.

2. Core political structures in Britain and Colonial America

2.1. British constitutional structure

Eighteenth-century Britain combined monarchy, the House of Lords and the House of Commons in a constitutional system known as a mixed government. After the Glorious Revolution, the Crown was still needed for appointments, patronage, diplomacy and the executive branch, however, Parliament controlled legislation and taxation. Virtual representations were felt virtually, not spatially. Members of Parliament were expected to consider the interest of the whole realm, including persons who did not vote and places that did not elect members.

Therefore, the leading figures in the city failed to accept the colonial demand for representative taxation by the tax-paying public. If Parliament represented the whole of the empire, then colonial consent would have been obtained constitutionally. Parliamentary Sovereignty also provided a clear legal hierarchy. No colonial charter, assembly resolution or local custom could prevent an act of Parliament. The Declaratory Act clearly stated this authority in the assertion that it could bind the colonies in all cases [6]. Otherwise, it would be difficult to maintain the unity of the country, and other areas might be tempted to seek such exemptions.

2.2. Colonial American constitutional structure

Colonial governments varied to some extent, but most had a governor, a council and an elected lower house. The Assemblies voted on local taxes and appropriations, passed laws, used the control of salaries to influence governors and officials, etc. County courts, town meetings, juries and local offices extended participation beyond the provincial capital. The above practices created a political culture that expected the authorities to be closer to the people and linked tax collection to their approval.

The colonial leaders did not immediately oppose all of imperial power. Many permitted regulations of foreign trade and acknowledged royal supervision. The boundary dispute concerned only internal laws and taxes. After a long time under the previous negotiated empire, this boundary had appeared to have a constitutional basis without ever being stipulated in a top-tier written document. Therefore, the colonial assemblies did not consider parliamentary taxes a tax on the people, but an interference with their own territory. They believed that the institutional memory and repeated practice of the representative body entitled them to certain rights that could not be revoked by ordinary laws.

2.3. Comparative institutional features

Fundamental institutional rifts separated British metropolitan governance and the political systems of North American colonies across six key areas, laying the groundwork for irreconcilable disagreements over legitimate power. Britain adhered to the doctrine of indivisible parliamentary sovereignty and rejected any split of supreme power between imperial and local bodies, while colonies operated under a system of shared authority between imperial institutions and provincial governments, leaving no universally recognized mechanism to allocate ultimate jurisdiction. The two sides also clashed over representation: Britain relied on the concept of virtual parliamentary representation, yet colonial political legitimacy stemmed from direct local elections, creating conflicting standards for popular consent. Disparities likewise existed in taxation, executive oversight, legal hierarchy and trade rules. Parliament claimed full tax authority across the empire, whereas colonies insisted their own assemblies held sole power over internal revenue, royal officials drew independent imperial funding, while colonial governors were financially beholden to local legislatures, Parliament's laws superseded colonial charters and customs, yet colonists viewed those foundational documents as binding limits on imperial power, rigid, nationwide imperial trade rules stood opposed to colonies' customary flexible commercial arrangements. Though these institutional gaps once generated mild interference from Parliament, after 1763 the empire sought to establish formal, consistent administrative supervision over the colonies. Each side viewed compromise on these core principles as an existential threat to its entire political framework, resulting in mutual refusal to yield ground [2, 3, 5].

3. Manifestations of Anglo-American institutional conflict

3.1. Legislative conflict

The Stamp Act crisis set the stage for the crisis. Parliament introduced a direct internal tax via imperial edict. The Colonial Assemblies and Intercolonial Congresses believed that the tax would only be imposed with their consent. Repeal temporarily restored peace, but the Declaratory Act maintained the original claim of unlimited parliamentary power. Thus, the settlement did not eliminate the immediate cause of the policy.

The Townshend Duties resulted in a new type of conflict. Although they were external duties, they paid governors and judges and thus reduced the financial burden on colonial assemblies. Therefore, the problem was the institutional independence of executive and judicial offices from the local people's congresses, not just the category of taxes.

The Coercive Acts of 1774 were due to the tax crisis and constitutional limitations. Changes to the Massachusetts government, restrictions on town meetings, and the closure of Boston Harbor suggested that the representative institutions could be altered or disabled by metropolitan command. The First Continental Congress claimed the rights of the colonies and organised resistance [7]. Thus, the conflict of powers resulted in a situation where Parliament asserted its sovereignty and expanded the colonial institution claiming an independent source of authority.

3.2. Trade and fiscal conflict

The UK's trade regulation predated the crisis and had altered institutional forms after the war. Previously, the merchants and assemblies had some flexibility in adapting the Navigation system

locally. After 1763, customs expansion, writs of assistance, vice-admiralty jurisdiction and new duties replaced accommodation with direct supervision.

Colonial Resistance also became institutionalised. Non-importation agreements connected merchants, consumers, committees and assemblies across provincial borders. Economic protest was thus a form of constitutional organisation. It formed a mechanism for cooperation outside the imperial system and trained local committees to oversee the implementation. The Tea Act thus promoted this trend, as an economic benefit for the East India Company, it was seen by some as support for the Parliament's tax system. The destruction of tea in Boston led to the Coercive Acts and thus altered trade policy through sovereignty.

Every major British policy launched between 1764 and 1774 carried clear practical administrative aims while triggering far-reaching institutional repercussions. Revenue-focused laws asserted Parliament's power to levy internal colonial taxes, customs reforms stripped colonies of self-managed administrative autonomy, commercial monopolies granted London full control over colonial market operations. Widespread colonial opposition intensified consistently because each contested policy deliberately circumvented or undermined the local elected bodies colonists recognized as the only legitimate channels to grant tax consent. The Sugar Act tied trade rules to core constitutional grievances, the Stamp Act sparked the first coordinated inter-colonial protest movement, the Declaratory Act kept the core sovereignty dispute unresolved even after stamp duties were repealed, Townshend levies further eroded assemblies' power over government salaries and boosted organized boycotts, the Tea Act directly incited the Boston Tea Party, and the Coercive Acts unified all thirteen colonies to build parallel cross-colonial governing coordination outside British rule [8].

4. Historical inevitability of the American revolution

4.1. Parliamentary sovereignty and colonial self-government

The two claims were in opposition and therefore could not be simultaneously realised. Parliament believed it had the whole empire by right and thus no borders. Colonial assemblies claimed the right of internal taxation and gradually extended this to internal legislation. A stable settlement requires a rule for a special Area. There was no such rule, and no neutral court had the parties' acceptance.

The compromises that were proposed took the following forms: colonial representation in Parliament, an imperial federation, and the separation of external regulation and internal taxation. All the proposals failed for institutional reasons. Colonial representation would have been relatively small in number and politically distant. Neither the outside nor the inside could control the funds for the colonial government. Imperial federalism required Parliament to accept divided sovereignty and thus contradicted the previous metropolitan doctrine.

Therefore, the conflict led to a commitment problem. Although that particular act had been repealed, Parliament still believed it had the authority to pass another. Colonial obedience to a single standard could be considered evidence of constitutional subordination. The British officials did not wish to reduce the power of the empire. Neither party was willing to make a limited concession for fear of further withdrawal. The dispute was self-perpetuating because the defence by each institution appeared to be an attack on the other.

4.2. Collapse of constitutional compromise

By 1774, the institutions of reconciliation had become increasingly restrictive. Parliament considered Massachusetts a case to test the application of imperial law. Other colonies thought that the punishment of Massachusetts showed that their own assemblies and local liberties were unstable. The Continental Congress turned the separate provincial complaints into a general constitutional problem. Therefore, a network of enforcement worked alongside the central government.

Armed conflict in 1775 expedited the transfer of power. Provincial congresses and safety committees raised troops, issued regulations, and coordinated resources at the Continental Congress. These bodies performed governmental functions and did not simply protest the government. The competing organizations asserted their own submission and began selecting a head.

The Declaration of Independence listed various acts of government interference with the people's rights and freedoms as evidence that the government had lost the people's trust [9]. The Revolution was structurally unavoidable after the introduction of shared sovereignty and constitutional vagueness. At that time, the restoration of the old empire required the dismantling of colonial institutions that had gained legitimacy through resistance, and recognition of these institutions demanded that Britain relinquish parliamentary supremacy. Military conflict resulted in a division already caused by institutions.

5. Historical impact and contemporary implications

The Revolution changed the Origin and Form of political power. Independence did not believe that a far-off legislature could represent the people without their consent. State constitutions put representative government on a written basis, and later federal arrangements attempted to solve the problem that the British Empire had failed to address. Authority can be divided at different levels of government without considering each jurisdictional boundary an infringement of sovereignty. The Social Costs Were Not Evenly Distributed. Wood refers to the Revolution's all-around changes in hierarchy, political participation and public expectations [10]. At the same time, the new order maintained slavery, restricted suffrage, and denied Indigenous self-determination. Thus, the institutional achievements were not universal equality but rather a long-lasting redefinition of legitimate government based on consent, written limitations and divided authority. The republican language of civic virtue and corruption also connected the Revolution to the wider Atlantic system [11]. Greene's analysis of the centre and the periphery also affected later ideas of federalism and constitutional development due to the imperial crisis [12].

The Anglo-American crisis offers some general lessons for multilevel governance. First, legal supremacy cannot be equated with political legitimacy indefinitely. Although a central authority has formal powers, it will still face opposition from the people's side if it is not credible. Secondly, the constitution is vague in terms of cooperation during peacetime, but when the government increases taxes, adds more regulations or strengthens law enforcement, this ambiguity will lead to a conflict. Set out an express clause regarding the jurisdiction of courts. Third, coercive uniformity may strengthen the institutions it intends to curb. Parliamentary Punishment promoted colonial cooperation, economic organisation and a parallel government. Comparative imperial history shows that stable rule was based on negotiated authority rather than administrative power alone [13]. Finally, the federal idea that emerged from the crisis adopted a design for divided lawmaking authority that was feasible at the time [14]. These implications are still relevant to unions, federations and regional organisations, but the experience of the eighteenth century should not be directly applied to the present day.

6. Conclusion

The American Revolution cannot be explained simply as a response to taxes or as an automatic outcome of the ideas of the Revolution. The root cause was that the British and the colonies had become increasingly incompatible. Britain had a higher fiscal demand after the Seven Years' War, a more assertive idea of parliamentary power, and hoped for imperial unity. Colonial America had developed mature representative assemblies at that time, established local taxation practices, and, in a political culture that viewed consent through local institutions as a constitutional right, had done so.

Each practical measure also turned out to be a constitutional problem. The Stamp Act raised revenue for the colonies, but the Declaratory Act stated that Parliament still had full legislative powers. Tighter trade enforcement extended courts and customs administration beyond the usual local scope. The Coercive Acts thus showed that metropolitan power could change the representative government. Colonial resistance led to the construction of congresses, committees, non-importation networks, and finally institutions of self-governance.

Historical necessity in this analysis does not mean that independence was predetermined in 1763. Other Settlements were still possible for a long time. Inevitability refers to the structural closure of peaceful options by 1774 and 1775. Parliament would not recognise an independent colonial legislative system without forfeiting the rule of law. The colonial assemblies could not agree to the unlimited powers of Parliament, and thus were deprived of the autonomy that gave them legitimacy. No court, federal council or written imperial constitution agreed to the conflict or made the restraint credible.

The main deficiency of this paper is that it only considers political institutions. Other Reasons for the Revolution include social classes, religion, slavery, etc. In the future, all these factors will be combined and compared with other imperial regions in North America. Despite the above limitations, the institution's perspective also shows why the policy disagreements continued. The Revolution became necessary because the competing constitutional orders both demanded the obedience of the same people and offered no legitimate path for reconciliation.

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