

Coercive (Intolerable) Acts

By 1774, there had been almost a decade of revolutionary fervor in Boston. British taxation policies, such as the Stamp Act of 1765, had sparked a debate in the North American colonies over the constitutional meaning of representation.

Leading radicals like Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, and John Hancock argued that because the colonists weren't represented in Parliament, that legislative body had no right to tax them.

The stationing of British troops in Boston had infuriated townspeople, setting the stage for the Boston Massacre in 1770. On December 17, 1773 Boston radicals led by the Sons of Liberty boarded British ships filled with thousands of pounds of East India Company tea. They dumped nearly 350 crates into the harbor.

After the Boston Tea Party, the British adopted a divide-and-conquer strategy that sought to isolate troublemaking Boston from the other colonies, which leaders in Parliament believed were merely tagging along with Boston's radicals. (Khan Academy)

After news of the Boston Tea Party in December 1773 reached England, the members of Parliament passed several acts designed to punish the misbehaving colonists and force them to submit to the government's authority. (Cal State Long Beach)

In London, response to the destruction of the tea was swift and strong. The violent destruction of property infuriated King George III and the prime minister, Lord North, who insisted the loss be repaid. Though some American merchants put forward a proposal for restitution, the Massachusetts Assembly refused to make payments.

Massachusetts's resistance to British authority united different factions in Great Britain against the colonies. North had lost patience with the unruly British subjects in Boston.

Lord North declared:

"The Americans have tarred and feathered your subjects, plundered your merchants, burnt your ships, denied all obedience to your laws and authority;

yet so clement and so long forbearing has our conduct been that it is incumbent on us now to take a different course. Whatever may be the consequences, we must risk something; if we do not, all is over."

The cumulative effect of the reports of colonial resistance to British rule during the winter of 1773–74 was to make Parliament more determined than ever to assert its authority in America. The main force of its actions fell on Boston, which seemed to be the center of colonial hostility. (Britannica)

Both Parliament and the king agreed that Massachusetts should be forced to both pay for the tea and yield to British authority.

In early 1774, leaders in Parliament responded with a set of four measures designed to punish Massachusetts, commonly known as the Coercive Acts.

- The Boston Port Bill (March 31, 1774) shut down Boston Harbor until the East India Company was repaid. The act authorized the Royal Navy to blockade Boston Harbor because “the commerce of his Majesty’s subjects cannot be safely carried on there.” The blockade commenced on June 1, 1774, effectively closing Boston’s port to commercial traffic. Additionally, it forbade any exports to foreign ports or provinces. The only imports allowed were provisions for the British Army and necessary goods, such as fuel and wheat.
- The Massachusetts Government Act (May 20, 1774) abolished the colony’s charter of 1691, reducing it to the level of a crown colony, replacing the elective local council with an appointive one, enhancing the powers of the military governor, Gen. Thomas Gage, and forbidding town meetings without approval.
- The Administration of Justice Act (May 20, 1774) was aimed at protecting British officials charged with capital offenses during law enforcement. It allowed the royal governor to unilaterally move any trial of a crown officer out of Massachusetts, a change designed to prevent hostile Massachusetts juries from deciding these cases.
- The Quartering Act (June 2, 1774) revived the indignation that surrounded the earlier Quartering Act, which had been allowed to expire in 1770. The new Quartering Act applied to all of British America and gave colonial governors the right to requisition unoccupied buildings to house British troops. However, in Massachusetts the British troops were forced to remain camped on the Boston Common until the following November because the Boston patriots refused to allow workmen to repair the vacant buildings General Gage had obtained for quarters.

The most important of them was the first passed, the Boston Port Act, because it was news of its passage that led to the call for the First Continental Congress. Within a year, the British government's attempt to enforce the bundle of legislation tipped a constitutional crisis into the Revolutionary War. (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

At the same time, Parliament also passed the Quebec Act (also known as the Canada Act) (June 22, 1774); it is sometimes included as one of the four Coercive Acts, but it was under consideration by Parliament before the Boston Tea Party. The Quebec Act expanded the boundaries of Quebec westward. The Act also granted “the free Exercise of the Religion of the Church of Rome,” as the territory was home to a large French Catholic majority.

For many Protestant colonists, especially Congregationalists in New England, this forced tolerance of Catholicism was the most objectionable provision of the act. Additionally, expanding the boundaries of Quebec raised troubling questions for many colonists who eyed the West, hoping to expand the boundaries of their provinces. The Quebec Act appeared gratuitous, a slap in the face to colonists already angered by the Coercive Acts. (Hawaii-edu, Rice University)

Rather than isolating rebellious colonists in Boston from the rest of the American populace, acts which closed the port to commerce and undercut representative government inspired colonists outside of Massachusetts to support the beleaguered Bostonians. (Cal State Long Beach)

The Coercive Acts closed the port of Boston, unilaterally changed the government of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to centralize British authority, permitted colonial leaders accused of crimes to be tried in another colony or in England, and sanctioned the billeting of British troops in unused buildings.

North's ministry considered the acts as critical to the restoration of Parliament's authority in the colonies. British Americans perceived them as arbitrary and unreasonable attacks on fundamental constitutional rights.

Among the Intolerable Acts, some colonials included the Quebec Act, because it protected the Roman Catholic Church in Canada, established a royally-appointed rather than an elected legislative assembly, and placed much of the western territory that colonials hoped to exploit outside of the reach of American governments.



In this British political cartoon, which was reprinted in the American colonies, notable members of Parliament hold down an allegorical figure of America and force tea down her throat. The London Magazine, May 1, 1774, LOC

Although the clear target of the Intolerable Acts was Boston, the greater audience for the legislation included every radical and potential opposition leader in the British Atlantic.

The revocation of the province's 1691 charter by the Massachusetts Government Act, for example, was an intentional display of the supremacy of Parliament, a serious lesson to be learned by all of the colonies, from Ireland to Barbados.

If the legislation succeeded in separating Boston from the rest of the colonies and bringing its residents to heel, no disaffected upstarts could legitimately claim that sovereignty over any constitutional matters derived from any source outside of Parliament.

First Continental Congress

Word of the Intolerable Acts led to an unprecedented outbreak of public dismay and disaffection throughout British America (including the Caribbean) and directly resulted in the creation of the First Continental Congress in September 1774, comprised of delegates from 13 of the mainland colonies. (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

Instead of isolating Boston from the other North American colonies, the Intolerable Acts had the opposite result. Delegates from all of the colonies except Georgia gathered in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress in the autumn of 1774.

The purpose of the Congress was to show support for Boston and to work out a unified approach to the British.

Nevertheless, divisions plagued the colonies. Though the congress agreed to implement a boycott of British imported goods, the northern and southern colonies argued fiercely over a measure to ban all exports to Britain. The southern colonies were economically dependent on revenues from their exports of raw materials such as cotton and rice to the motherland.

The delegates ultimately reached a compromise, agreeing that all exports to Britain, Ireland, and the British West Indies would be banned after a year, starting in September 1775. This would give the southern colonies some time to prepare for the economic impact of the export ban.

On October 14, 1774, the First Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Colonial Rights and Grievances. The declaration denied Parliament's right to tax the colonies and lambasted the British for stationing troops in Boston.

It characterized the Intolerable Acts as an assault on colonial liberties, rejected British attempts to circumscribe representative government, and requested that the colonies prepare their militias. Despite its harsh tone, the declaration did affirm Parliament's right to regulate trade, and did not challenge colonial loyalty to the British monarch, King George III.

Although some of the more radical delegates, particularly Samuel Adams, already believed that war was inevitable, the congress did not seek or declare independence from Britain at this time. The delegates agreed to meet again the following May if relations did not improve. (Khan Academy)

Information here is primarily from Cal State Long Beach; Hawaii-edu, Rice University; Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Khan Academy

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young