

Second Continental Congress

On the final day of the First Continental Congress, the delegates adopted a Petition addressed to “The King’s Most Excellent Majesty” (on October 26, 1774).

They did not draft such a letter to the British Parliament as the colonists viewed the Parliament as the aggressor behind the recent Intolerable Acts. Not fully expecting the standoff in Massachusetts to explode into full-scale war, the Congress agreed to reconvene in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775.

Delegates returned to their respective colonies and worked to ensure that Congress’s mandates were implemented. In London, Parliamentary factions debate the merits of offering concessions to the colonies, although the British ministry takes no official notice of Congress’s petitions and addresses.

The colonies are abuzz following the adjournment of the First Continental Congress. As colonists deliberated and implemented Congress’s mandates, they also pondered the future of their relationship with Great Britain.

How will the King respond to Congress’s petition? Will the proposed Association (a comprehensive non-importation and non-exportation scheme) force Parliament to repeal the Coercive Acts? Colonists wait only a few short months for an answer.

The first document ratified by Congress - the Suffolk Resolve - was carried to Great Britain in October 1774. In response, King George III opened Parliament on November 30, 1774 with a speech condemning Massachusetts and declaring the colony to be in a state of rebellion.

As news of the speech spread throughout Massachusetts and the American colonies, residents shared their hopes, fears, and opinions with one another.

On February 3, 1775 Abigail Adams wrote to Mercy Otis Warren, reporting among other things, “The die is cast ... but it seems to me the Sword is now our only, yet dreadful alternative”,

The die is cast. Yesterday brought us such a Speech from the Throne as will stain with everlasting infamy the reign of G[e]orge the 3 determined to carry into Execution “the acts passd by the late parliament, and to Mantain the authority of the Legislature over all his dominions.”

The reply of the house of commons and the house of Lords shew us the most wicked and hostile measures will be persued against us—even without giving us an opportunity to be heard in our defence. Infatuated Brittain! poor distressed America.

Heaven only knows what is next to take place but it seems to me the Sword is now our only, yet dreadful alternative, and the fate of Rome will be renued in Brittain.

She who has been the envy of nations will now become an object of their Scorn and abhorance, and as it was said of Rome that she governd other people by her will but her own by Law, they now behold her governd herself by will, by the Arbitrary Will of the worst of her own citizens,

and arrived at that period which has been foretold when the people co-operateing with the Enimies of the constitution by Electing those to represent them who are hired to betray them, or

by submitting tamely when the mask is taken of or falls of, and the attempt to bring beggary and Slavery is avoued or can be no longer concealed.

When this happens the Friends of Liberty, should any such remain will have one option still left, and will rather chuse no doubt to die [the] last British freemen, than bear to live the first of British Slaves,

and this now seems to be all that is left to americans with unfeigned and penitant suplications to that Being who delights in the welfare of his creatures, and who we humbly hope will engage on our side,

and who if we must go forth in defence of our injured and oppressed Country will we hope deliver us from the hands of our enimies and those that persecute us.

Tho an hoste should encamp against [us] our hearts will not fear. Tho war should rise against us, in this will we be confident, that the Lord reigneth. Let thy Mercy o Lord be upon us according as we hope in thee. (Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams)

The Petition of the First Continental Congress to King George III was approved on the last day of that Congress. In part, it stated,

WE your majesty's faithful subjects of the colonies of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode-Island and Providence plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, the counties of Newcastle, Kent and Sussex on Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, and South-Carolina,

in behalf of ourselves and the inhabitants of those colonies, who have deputed us to represent them in general congress, by this our humble petition, beg leave to lay our grievances before the throne. ...

By several acts of parliament made in the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth years of your majesty's reign, duties are imposed on us, for the purpose of raising a revenue, and the powers of admiralty and vice-admiralty courts are extended beyond their ancient limits, whereby our property is taken from us without our consent ...

Had our creator been pleased to give us existence in a land of slavery, the sense of our condition might have been mitigated by ignorance and habit ; but, thanks be to his adoreable goodness, we were born the heirs of freedom, and ever enjoyed our rights under the auspices of your royal ancestors, whose family was seated on the British throne to rescue and secure a pious and gallant nation from the popery and despotism of a superstitious and inexorable tyrant.

Your majesty, we are confident, justly rejoices, that your title to the crown is thus founded on the title of your people to liberty ; and therefore we doubt not but your royal wisdom must approve the sensibility that teaches your subjects anxiously to guard the blessing they received from divine providence, and thereby to prove the performance of that compact which elevated the illustrious house of Brunswick to the imperial dignity it now possesses. ...

Feeling as men, and thinking as subjects, in the manner we do, silence would be disloyalty. By giving this faithful information we do all in our power to promote the great objects of your royal cares, the tranquillity of your government and the welfare of your people. ...



We ask but for peace, liberty and safety. We wish not a diminution of the prerogative, nor do we solicit the grant of any new right in our favour. Your royal authority over us and our connection with Great-Britain, we shall always carefully and zealously endeavour to support and maintain. ...

In the magnanimity and justice of your majesty and parliament, we confide for a redress of our other grievances, trusting, that when the causes of our apprehensions are removed, our future conduct will prove us not unworthy of the regard we have been accustomed in our happier days to enjoy. ...

Permit us then, most gracious sovereign, in the name of all your faithful people in America, with the utmost humility to implore you, for the honour of Almighty God, whose pure religion our enemies are undermining ; for your glory, which can be advanced only by rendering your subjects happy, and keeping them united ; for the interest of your family depending on an adherence to the principles that enthroned it ; for the safety and welfare of your kingdoms and dominions threatened with almost unavoidable dangers and distresses:

That your Majesty, as the loving father of your whole people, connected by the same bands of law, loyalty, faith and blood, though dwelling in various countries, will not suffer the transcendent relation formed by these ties, to be farther violated, in uncertain expectation of effects, that if attained, never can compensate for the calamities through which they must be gained.

We therefore most earnestly beseech your majesty, that your royal authority and interposition may be used for our relief, and that a gracious answer may be given to this petition.

That your majesty may enjoy every felicity, through a long and glorious reign, over loyal and happy subjects, and that your descendants may inherit your prosperity and dominions, till time shall be no more, is, and always will be, our sincere and fervent prayer.

Many delegates were skeptical about changing the king's attitude towards the colonies, but believed that every opportunity should be exhausted to de-escalate the conflict before taking more radical act

A contingent was sent to England to present and discuss the Petition with the King. A copy of the petition was sent on November 6. Benjamin Franklin noted that the presentation to the King,

rested on Mr. [William] Bolla, Mr. [Arthur] Lee, and myself. We took Council with our best Friends, and were advised to present it through Lord Dartmouth, that being the regular official method, and the only one in which we might on occasion call for an Answer. ...

The Secretary of State, after a Day's Perusal (during which a Council was held), told us it was a decent and proper Petition, and cheerfully undertook to present it to his Majesty, who, he afterwards assured us, was pleased to receive it very graciously, and to promise to lay it, as soon as they met, before his two Houses of Parliament.

On December 22, Lee wrote to his brother giving him much the same information and stating that Lord Dartmouth reported that the Address "was found to be decent and respectfu!"

Two days later, Franklin wrote to America that the petition would be presented to Parliament when it reconvened after the Christmas recess.

It was presented to the House of Commons by Lord North on January 19, 1775, as No. 149 of a set of papers, and to the House of Lords the next day. (Wolf) Franklin reported back that,

It came down among a great Heap of letters of Intelligence from Governors and officers in America, Newspapers, Pamphlets, Handbills, etc., from that Country, the last in the List, and was laid upon the Table with them, undistinguished by any particular Recommendation of it to the Notice of either House; and I do not find, that it has had any further notice taken of it as yet, than that it has been read as well as the other Papers.

No answer was ever made to the first attempt of Congress to appeal to the King. (Wolf)

War Breaks Out Before The Second Continental Congress Convenes

Instead, war broke out in Massachusetts (Lexington and Concord) on April 19, 1775. Many delegates are already enroute to Philadelphia, where Congress was scheduled to convene on May 10, 1775.

For the first few months of this conflict, the Patriots had carried on their struggle in an ad-hoc and uncoordinated manner. At this point, the Second Continental Congress intervened and assumed leadership of the war effort. They resolved to prepare for war but continued to seek reconciliation.

Notable additions of attendees include Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Lyman Hall, the lone delegate representing a single parish in Georgia.

In Massachusetts, the Provincial Congress formed when military governor Thomas Gage dissolved the legislature in 1774. Arguing that “General Gage hath actually levied war” against them, Massachusetts patriots hope Congress will suggest a mechanism for creating a civil government to manage the colony.

As British authority crumbled in the colonies, the Continental Congress effectively took over as the de facto national government, thereby exceeding the initial authority granted to it by the individual colonial governments. However, the local groups that had formed to enforce the colonial boycott continued to support the Congress.

On June 14, the Second Continental Congress created a continental army and appointed George Washington commander-in-chief.



Meanwhile, the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775 forced many delegates to rethink their position on reconciliation. As accounts of the battle reach Philadelphia, Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson are drafting the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking up Arms. John Adams calls the document a spirited Manifesto.

Before sending Washington to Boston to meet the troops in July, Congress adopted a comprehensive set of military regulations designed to marshal the troops.

In addition, on June 22, 1775, it approved the first release of \$1 million in bills of credit (paper currency), Issued in defense of American liberty, Congress authorized the printing of another \$1 million in July. (By the end of 1775, Congress will authorize a total of \$6 million bills of credit.)

Olive Branch Petition

Unwilling to completely abandon their hope for peace, the Olive Branch Petition was adopted by Congress on July 5, 1775 to be sent to the King as a last attempt to prevent formal war from being declared. The Petition emphasized their loyalty to the British crown and emphasized their rights as British citizens.

We, your Majesty's faithful subjects of the colonies of new Hampshire, Massachusetts bay, Rhode island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the counties of New Castle, Kent, and Sussex, on Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, in behalf of ourselves, and the inhabitants of these colonies, who have deputed us to represent them in general Congress, entreat your Majesty's gracious attention to this our humble petition.

The union between our Mother country and these colonies, and the energy of mild and just government, produced benefits so remarkably important, and afforded such an assurance of their permanency and increase, that the wonder and envy of other Nations were excited, while they beheld Great Britain rising to a power the most extraordinary the world had ever known. ...

We shall decline the ungrateful task of describing the irksome variety of artifices, practised by many of your Majesty's Ministers, the delusive pretences, fruitless terrors, and unavailing severities, that have, from time to time, been dealt out by them, in their attempts to execute this impolitic plan, or of tracing, thro' a series of years past, the progress of the unhappy differences between Great Britain and these colonies, which have flowed from this fatal source.

Your Majesty's Ministers, persevering in their measures, and proceeding to open hostilities for enforcing them, have compelled us to arm in our own defence, and have engaged us in a controversy so peculiarly abhorrent to the affections of your still faithful colonists, that when we consider whom we must oppose in this contest, and if it continues, what may be the consequences, our own particular misfortunes are accounted by us only as parts of our distress.

Knowing to what violent resentments and incurable animosities, civil discords are apt to exasperate and inflame the contending parties, we think ourselves required by indispensable obligations to Almighty God, to your Majesty, to our fellow subjects, and to ourselves, immediately to use all the means in our power, not incompatible with our safety, for stopping the further effusion of blood, and for averting the impending calamities that threaten the British Empire. ...

Attached to your Majesty's person, family, and government, with all devotion that principle and affection can inspire, connected with Great Britain by the strongest ties that can unite societies, and deploring every event that tends in any degree to weaken them, we solemnly assure your Majesty, that we not only most ardently desire the former harmony between her and these colonies may be restored, but that a concord may be established between them upon so firm a basis as to perpetuate its blessings,

uninterrupted by any future dissensions, to succeeding generations in both countries, and to transmit your Majesty's Name to posterity, adorned with that signal and lasting glory, that has attended the memory of those illustrious personages, whose virtues and abilities have extricated states from dangerous convulsions, and, by securing happiness to others, have erected the most noble and durable monuments to their own fame.

We beg leave further to assure your Majesty, that notwithstanding the sufferings of your loyal colonists, during the course of the present controversy, our breasts retain too tender a regard for the kingdom from which we derive our origin, to request such a reconciliation as might in any manner be inconsistent with her dignity or her welfare.

These, related as we are to her, honor and duty, as well as inclination, induce us to support and advance; and the apprehensions that now oppress our hearts with unspeakable grief, being once removed. your Majesty will find your faithful subjects on this continent ready and willing at all times, as they ever have been, with their lives and fortunes, to assert and maintain the rights and interests of your Majesty, and of our Mother country.

We, therefore, beseech your Majesty, that your royal authority and influence may be graciously interposed to procure us relief from our afflicting fears and jealousies, occasioned by the system before mentioned, and to settle peace through every part of your dominions ...

that your Majesty be pleased to direct some mode, by which the united applications of your faithful colonists to the throne, in pursuance of their common councils, may be improved into a happy and permanent reconciliation; and that, in the mean time, measures may be taken for preventing the further destruction of the lives of your Majesty's subjects; and that such statutes as more immediately distress any of your Majesty's colonies may be repealed.

For by such arrangements as your Majesty's wisdom can form, for collecting the united sense of your American people, we are convinced your Majesty would receive such satisfactory proofs of the disposition of the colonists towards their sovereign and parent state, that the wished for opportunity would soon be restored to them, of evincing the sincerity of their professions, by every testimony of devotion becoming the most dutiful subjects, and the most affectionate colonists.

That your Majesty may enjoy a long and prosperous reign, and that your descendants may govern your dominions with honor to them selves and happiness to their subjects, is our sincere and fervent prayer.

After a flurry of activity in June and July, Congress adjourned for a brief respite on August 2, 1775.

William Penn carried the Olive Branch Petition to London, but the king refused to see him. Instead, the king issued a proclamation on August 23 declaring,

WHEREAS many of Our Subjects in divers Parts of Our Colonies and Plantations in North America, misled by dangerous and ill-designing Men, and forgetting the Allegiance which they owe to the Power that has protected and sustained them,

after various disorderly Acts committed in Disturbance of the Publick Peace, to the Obstruction

of lawful Commerce, and to the Oppression of Our loyal Subjects carrying on the same, have at length proceeded to an open and avowed Rebellion,

by arraying themselves in hostile Manner to withstand the Execution of the Law, and traitorously preparing, ordering, and levying War against Us;

And whereas there is Reason to apprehend that such Rebellion hath been much promoted and encouraged by the traitorous Correspondence, Counsels, and Comfort of divers wicked and desperate Persons within this Realm : To the End therefore that none of Our Subjects may neglect or violate their Duty through Ignorance thereof, or through any Doubt of the Protection which the Law will afford to their Loyalty and Zeal;

We have thought fit, by and with the Advice of Our Privy Council, to issue this Our Royal Proclamation, hereby declaring that not only all Our Officers Civil and Military are obliged to exert their utmost Endeavours to suppress such Rebellion, and to bring the Traitors to Justice;

but that all Our Subjects of this Realm and the Dominions thereunto belonging are bound by Law to be aiding and assisting in the Suppression of such Rebellion, and to disclose and make known all traitorous Conspiracies and Attempts against Us, Our Crown and Dignity;

And We do accordingly strictly charge and command all Our Officers as well Civil as Military, and all other Our obedient and loyal Subjects, to use their utmost Endeavours to withstand and suppress such Rebellion, and to disclose and make known all Treasons and traitorous Conspiracies which they shall know to be against Us, Our Crown and Dignity;

and for that Purpose, that they transmit to One of Our Principal Secretaries of State, or other proper Officer, due and full Information of all Persons who shall be found carrying on Correspondence with, or in any Manner or Degree aiding or abetting the Persons now in open Arms and Rebellion against Our Government within any of Our Colonies and Plantations in North America, in order to bring the condign Punishment the Authors, Perpetrators and Abettors of such traitorous Designs.

Second Continental Congress Reconvenes

When the body reconvened on September 13, 1775 three new delegates representing the entire colony of Georgia are present.

As Massachusetts had done in 1775, individual colonies seek the advice of Congress. John Adams explains his own opinions on the “divine science of politicks” and the most advantageous structure of government in the pamphlet Thoughts on Government.

In February 1776, Congress received news of the Prohibitory Act, which subjects all American vessels to confiscation by the Royal Navy. In March 1776, Congress sends a message of its own to British shipping interests: enemy vessels beware!

Opposition to independence is steadily waning in Congress, thanks in part to the popular support. Common Sense is published in Philadelphia in January 1776. Offering “simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense,” the pamphlet is a publishing success that stirs debate on the subject of independence.

On April 6, 1776, Congress responded to Parliament's actions by opening American ports to all foreign ships except British vessels. Reports from American agent Arthur Lee in London also served to support the revolutionary cause.

Lee's reports suggested that France was interested in assisting the colonies in their fight against Great Britain. With a peaceful resolution increasingly unlikely in 1775, Congress began to explore other diplomatic channels and dispatched congressional delegate Silas Deane to France in April of 1776.

As Congress continued to mobilize for war, delegates also debate the possibilities of foreign assistance and the "intricate and complicated subject" of American trade.

Deane succeeded in securing informal French support by May. By then, Congress was increasingly conducting international diplomacy and had drafted the Model Treaty with which it hoped to seek alliances with Spain and France.

Action for the Establishment of Alternative Structures of Authority

In late 1775 and early 1776, the provincial congresses of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Virginia asked the Second Continental Congress for advice on what to do about the unsettled condition of government caused by the outbreak of war with Britain.

Congress agreed that there was a crisis of authority, but recommended only the convening of popularly elected assemblies to set up interim measures for exercising governmental authority to last until the establishment of a reconciliation with Great Britain.

In the congressional debates on these requests, John Adams of Massachusetts and like-minded colleagues urged Congress to act more decisively by recommending the establishment of alternative structures of authority as early as possible before any final break with Britain.

Conservative delegates such as John Dickinson of Pennsylvania and James Duane and John Jay of New York argued in opposition that adopting new forms of government would be tantamount to declaring independence and would prevent reconciliation with the mother country.

It was not until May 10, 1776, that the Second Continental Congress finally adopted the following resolution drafted by John Adams. Five days later Congress accepted a preamble to the act also written by Adams, as noted below. (Richard Bernstein)

In Congress,
May 15, 1776

[1] WHEREAS his Britannic Majesty, in conjunction with the Lords and Commons of Great-Britain, has, by a late Act of Parliament, excluded the inhabitants of these United Colonies from the protection of his crown:

[2] And whereas no answer whatever to the humble petition of the Colonies for redress of grievances, and reconciliation with Great Britain has been or is likely to be given, but the whole

force of that kingdom, aided by foreign mercenaries, is to be exerted for the destruction of the good people of these Colonies:

[3] And whereas it appears absolutely irreconcilable to reason and good conscience, for the people of these Colonies now to take the oaths and affirmations necessary for the support of any government under the Crown of Great-Britain;

and it is necessary that the exercise of every kind of authority under the said Crown should be totally suppressed, and all the powers of government exerted under the authority of the people of the Colonies for the preservation of internal peace, virtue, and good order, as well as for the defence of their lives, liberties and properties, against the hostile invasions and cruel depredations of their enemies:

Therefore

RESOLVED, [4] That it be recommended to the respective Assemblies and Conventions of the United Colonies, where no Government sufficient to the exigencies of their affairs has been hitherto established, to adopt such Government as shall in the opinion of the Representatives of the People best conduce to the happiness and safety of their Constituents in particular, and America in general.

(Extract from the Minutes, Charles Thomson, Secretary, Philadelphia: Printed by John Dunlap)

Declaration of Independence

Many delegates fear their actions - such as the creation of new civil governments and the search for potential foreign allies - are tantamount to declaring independence. By June, delegates consider a resolution on the matter of independence itself

On July 4, 1776 the Congress took the important step of formally declaring the colonies' independence from Great Britain.



A depiction of Second Continental Congress voting on the Declaration of Independence

In September, Congress adopted the Model Treaty, and then sent commissioners to France to negotiate a formal alliance. They entered into a formal alliance with France in 1778. Congress eventually sent diplomats to other European powers to encourage support for the American cause and to secure loans for the money-strapped war effort.

Congress and the British government made further attempts to reconcile, but negotiations failed when Congress refused to revoke the Declaration of Independence, both in a meeting on September 11, 1776, with British Admiral Richard Howe, and when a peace delegation from Parliament arrived in Philadelphia in 1778.

Instead, Congress spelled out terms for peace on August 14, 1779, which demanded British withdrawal, American independence, and navigation rights on the Mississippi River. The next month Congress appointed John Adams to negotiate such terms with England, but British officials were evasive.

The war raged on throughout this time.

The Second Congress continued to meet until March 1, 1781, when the Articles of Confederation that established a new national government for the United States took effect.

Peace of Paris

Preliminary articles of peace were signed on November 30, 1782, and the Peace of Paris (September 3, 1783) ended the US War of Independence. Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States (with western boundaries to the Mississippi River) and ceded Florida to Spain.

Other provisions called for payment of US private debts to British citizens, American use of the Newfoundland fisheries, and fair treatment for American colonials loyal to Britain. (Britannica)

An estimated 6,800 Americans were killed in action, 6,100 wounded, and upwards of 20,000 were taken prisoner. Historians believe that at least an additional 17,000 deaths were the result of disease, including about 8,000–12,000 who died while prisoners of war.

Unreliable data places the total casualties for British regulars fighting in the Revolutionary War around 24,000 men. This total number includes battlefield deaths and injuries, deaths from disease, men taken prisoner, and those who remained missing. Approximately 1,200 Hessian soldiers were killed, 6,354 died of disease and another 5,500 deserted and settled in America afterward. (Battlefield)

Information here is primarily from National Archives; Library of Congress; US State Department; Mount Vernon Foundation; Massachusetts Historical Society; US History-org; Edwin Wolf; Richard Bernstein

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