

B. Causes and Provocations

British Taxes

European powers in the 17th and 18th centuries followed an economic policy known as mercantilism. According to mercantilism, colonies existed for the economic benefit of building up gold supplies and expanding trade for the home countries. To do this, nations had to export more to their colonies than they imported from them, which provided a favorable balance of trade for the mother country.

As a result, Great Britain imposed a series of taxes and export restrictions on the North American colonies, beginning in 1651 with the first of the Navigation

Have students begin a journal on the American Revolution. Each day, students should write about what they learned about the causes of the Revolutionary War, what the colonists considered important reasons for going to war, and how certain individuals played important roles in the war effort. Have them copy these topics into their journals, leaving 10 pages between each one.

I. The American Revolution

Acts. For example, under the Hat Act, the colonies were not permitted to manufacture or export beaver hats to other countries. However, through much of the late 1600s and up until 1764, Parliament adopted a policy of salutary neglect and did not enforce the taxes or trade laws in the colonies. The east coast of North America was long, and this made it difficult to patrol effectively in order to stop all smuggling and force the colonists to pay taxes on imports. In addition, British customs agents were often bribed to look the other way. In general, the colonists simply ignored the laws.

However, after 1763, the British Parliament began enforcing its policies in its North American colonies. The French and Indian War had cost Britain a great deal of money, which Parliament believed the colonists should help to repay through new taxes. The British reasoned that the Americans were the ones whose homes had been protected by the victory over the French and Native Americans. The mother country had sent soldiers to protect the colonies; why shouldn't the colonies accept some of the financial burden of the war?

The first action of Parliament was to pass and enforce the Sugar Act of 1764, which placed a tax on sugar, rum, and molasses bought from the French West Indies. The Molasses Act of 1733 had placed a tax on the same goods, but the British had not enforced that act. Now, the British set about making sure that the colonists could not smuggle in the goods from the French West Indies or any other port without paying the tax. The cry of "No taxation without representation" was soon heard from the colonists.

In his pamphlet *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*, James Otis argued that everyone should be "free from all taxes but [except] what he consents to in person, or by his representatives." The colonists based their argument on the idea of direct, or actual, representation. The colonial charters gave the citizens of each colony the same rights as people living in England, and in England, the right to tax was based in the House of Commons. The colonists had no representation in the House, but they had representatives in their own colonial legislatures. Otis and others believed that these local legislatures alone could tax colonists.

Parliament based its position on the principle of virtual representation. The members of the House of Commons represented all English men and women, whether they resided in England or elsewhere in the British Empire, and whether or not they could vote: poor men, women, and children (and slaves) could not vote but, according to this theory, they were "virtually represented" by the members of the House of Commons. By the same reasoning, it followed that colonists were "virtually represented."