

By the 1760s, American colonists and English Parliament had very different views about the extent of authority for governing the colonies. British officials assumed Parliamentary Sovereignty in which Parliament alone could tax and govern within England and its possessions. American colonists believed they had a certain amount of sovereignty to govern themselves through elected assemblies as a check on the power of appointed governors. In the eyes of the colonists, only these elected assemblies had the power to tax. Colonial charters were vague about Parliament's authority to govern and tax in America. A clash of ideals ensued when it tried to assert control after the French and Indian War. For years the colonists resisted against Parliament's attempts to assert power but it wasn't until the Boston Tea Party that Parliament took a hard line to force submission. Why did the English government wait so long to put its foot down? What could the colonists expect after the Intolerable Acts? What options were left for Boston and the other colonists? What could England do if the colonists rejected English actions? The Intolerable acts did not make war inevitable but they were certain to cause trouble.

For years the American colonists resisted and rebelled against increasing attempts at control by the British government, and the government responded with mild or conciliatory gestures until the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Parliament taxed the colonies and interfered with their internal affairs for the first time with the Revenue and Currency Acts of 1764. A year later they increased taxes with the Stamp Act. The colonists' response varied from peaceful, such as Massachusetts' call for a Stamp Act Congress, to violent with the effigy hanging and burning of stamp distributors and destruction of their homes and offices by mobs. In March 1766, Parliament's reluctant response was to repeal the Stamp Act and pass the Declaratory Act which clearly stated Parliament's right to legislate the colonies in "all cases whatsoever." At the time, England's attempt to impose a strong workable policy in America was hampered by problems at home and because of the King's rapid succession of ministers.

Eventually the Townshend Acts of 1767 were passed in an attempt to regain control. Boston residents attacked customs officials and formed a powerful boycott that spread to other colonies. The English response was to dissolve the Massachusetts legislature and bring in troops to occupy Boston. But by 1770, Parliament repealed the Townshend duties except the one on tea, for which the minister of state, Lord North, explained as, "a mark of the supremacy of Parliament and an efficient declaration of their right to govern the colonies." The economy improved, the protests died down, and the colonists smuggled in Dutch tea.

In 1772 England announced that it would pay the salaries of the superior court and governors, thereby cutting off the colonies limited control over them. Beginning in Massachusetts, the colonies protested through Committees of Correspondence. Rhode Islanders burned a British ship and convicted the captain for "illegally" seizing what he claimed to be smuggled sugar and rum. The next move by Parliament was the Tea Act in 1773, giving the East India Company a monopoly on the American tea market. Colonists continued to boycott tea and forced the resignation of tea agents. Eventually Bostonians boarded the tea ships and dumped the cargo into the harbor in what became known as the Boston Tea Party.

By this time the English government had suffered eight years of colonists' protests and insubordination. The Boston Tea Party was the final straw. The king's minister was convinced that the issue had gone beyond taxes. He interpreted the Boston Tea Party as a direct challenge to English authority. The king said, "We must master them or totally leave them to themselves and treat them as aliens." They punished Massachusetts with their strongest response ever—the Intolerable (Coercive) Acts.

The Intolerable Acts closed the port of Boston and gave much greater power to the governor while pulling the teeth out of the elected assembly. At the same time the English government passed the Quebec Act, which extended its lands to hamper colonial expansion and allowed only a governor-appointed legislature in the former French colony. To the colonists, this appeared to be the paradigm of what England would do to them. After the crippling Intolerable Acts, Massachusetts and the other colonies could only expect more harsh treatment from what they perceived as a despotic English government.

Massachusetts was left with the option of resisting or giving in to an oppressive government. Giving in clearly had the short term benefit of reopening the port of Boston but in the long run they were likely to lose more powers of self government. Resistance seemed to work in the past but what more could they do now? They needed the help of the other colonies, which they sought through circular letters and a request for the first Continental Congress.

The other colonies had to choose between supporting their American neighbor and looking out for their own economic interest. Boston's circular letter urged the colonies to cease all trade with England, but this was likely to cause as much harm on both sides of the Atlantic. It was a tough decision. They knew that what happened to Massachusetts could happen to them. At the first Continental Congress the colonies compromised with a delay on trade restrictions until after a deadline for rescinding the Intolerable Acts.

The Intolerable Acts brought the two sides closer to war but it was still avoidable. Some hard liners wanted outright resistance but the middle colonies pressed for reconciliation. Even after the battles of Lexington and Concord, the Second Continental Congress sent an "Olive Branch Petition" to the king, which he could have accepted. The English could have re-evaluated the American response and changed tactics. They could have used this opportunity to reform Parliamentary districts; eliminating "rotten boroughs" and offering the colonies seats in the House of Commons. Parliament could have sent a letter to the colonies explaining that the Quebec Act could not sanction an elected assembly because the French speaking majority would have dominated and that there was no intention to dissolve their own legislatures. Instead, the English government showed no mercy and became more oppressive. They dissolved colonial legislatures, embargoed American goods, and attempted to arrest resistance leaders in Concord. They rejected the Olive Branch Petition, declared the colonies in open rebellion, and dispatched thousands of troops to quell the insurrection.

Both sides engaged in a battle of wills in which there would be no retreat. The Boston Tea Party challenged Parliament's authority, requiring a stiff response from a government that refused to back down. The Intolerable Acts, together with the Quebec Act, left the colonists fearing for their continued sovereignty. Thus, their only choice was to give in or unite and resist. England chose to meet this colonial opposition with acts of increasing oppression rather than pursue peaceful options to deal with the crisis. This is what burned the final bridges of reconciliation.