

The Fight for Freedom and Independence of the First Nations of North America

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This article creates a small picture of how the American Revolution affected tribal people. To get a more complete picture, research what happened to the tribal sovereignty of specific Northeastern Tribes during and after the American Revolution to get a more complete understanding of the impact of US Independence on Northeastern tribal people.

We as a nation celebrate the Declaration of Independence with joy and pride, and rightly so! The freedoms all Americans enjoy were hard won and deserve to be celebrated and remembered. For native peoples, however, the Declaration of Independence has another meaning, too.

The Declaration of Independence supported the **misperceptions** of Indians at that time. Because Indians were referred to as 'savages' in the Declaration, many thought that this gave them the right to take advantage of and destroy Indians. The Declaration of Independence, whether or not the Founding Fathers intended it, encouraged the destruction of the independence, or **sovereignty**, of tribal people.

The Declaration says that Indians were "merciless Indian savages" who fought for the British Empire. This is only a small part of the whole truth.

Colin Calloway, author of *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, begins his book with a simple, yet powerful comparison:

*...Indian people in revolutionary America, whether they sided with rebels, redcoats, neither, or both, were doing pretty much the same thing as the American colonists: fighting for their freedom in **tumultuous** times. The Revolution was an anti-colonial war of **liberation** for Indian peoples too, but the **threat** to their freedom often came from colonial neighbors rather than distant capitals [meaning England, France, or Spain], and their colonial experience did not end with American independence. (xiii)*

Mr. Calloway is saying that it did not matter which side tribes sided with. After the American Revolution, the Indian fight for independence was just beginning.

For the first peoples of this continent, the American Revolution was devastating. It destroyed their ways of life and eliminated entire tribes and their homelands.

During the American Revolution, Tribes built **alliances** to preserve their own freedoms and homelands. Does this sound like the exact same goals as the colonists? Because the Revolution was about the control of Indian lands as much as it was about colonial independence, Indians lost freedom as Americans gained it. But loss of land was not the only price Indian nations paid.

During times of war, violence crops up in many places other than on the battlefield. In **futile** attempts to preserve their **tribal sovereignty**, Tribal nations often waged war against each other. Many tribes sided with, battled, destroyed, and were destroyed by *each other*. Many challenged their own tribal traditional ways of life, and **civil war** was the result.

Just as in any war, there was land lost and gained, and some tribes forced other tribes to move from their traditional homelands. For example, the Shawnees of Ohio moved to Missouri, and the Iroquois League split in two: one side lived in New York; the other in Ontario, Canada.

The sad truth is that it did not matter who Indian nations fought for: the outcome of the American Revolution for the many independent Northeastern tribes was a massive destruction of **tribal sovereignty**—an end to the freedoms they had known since **time immemorial**.

References:

Calloway, Colin G. *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 1995.

Calloway, Colin G. *Stories From the Revolution*
http://www.nps.gov/revwar/about_the_revoluti/on/american_indians.html

Study Questions:

1. How did the tribal nations who resided on the lands claimed by the colonies since time immemorial lose their freedom? (Through land claims by the British, Americans, French, and Spanish)
2. In addition to the fight for independence, what were the English, Americans, and the many Tribal Nations fighting for during the American Revolution? (Land)
3. Why might Indian nations in North America feel sad or angry about the Declaration of Independence—even today?
4. Why did some Indian Nations side with the British? The Americans?
5. Why did tribes begin fighting with each other during the American Revolution?
6. Why was the fight for independence just beginning *after* the American Revolution ended?
7. Imagine that your home is being **threatened** by others. They want to force you and your family out of your home. Friends and other family are being treated the same way. How would you feel?

To the teacher: Compare fight for tribal sovereignty to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Essential Questions:

1. Why did the tribes involved in the American Revolution want to be free?
2. How do local tribal nations make themselves heard by the United States government?

Guiding Questions:

1. What were the causes of Indian involvement in the American Revolution?
2. How did the Declaration of Independence impact Indian Nations whose homelands were taken over by non-Indians?

Vocabulary:

1. Time Immemorial:
2. Tribal Sovereignty:
3. Tumultuous (tumult):
4. Liberation (liberate)
5. Threat:
6. Futile:
7. Civil War:
8. Alliances (ally):
9. Misperception: