Did nascent nationalism help stimulate the American independence movement?

Viewpoint: Yes. Americans by the mid 1700s had developed a sense of nationalism resulting from increased political, economic, and cultural autonomy.

Viewpoint: No. Americans in 1776 were still too divided by differences in economy, demography, government, and settlement patterns to have developed a sense of nationalism; rather, the colonists were becoming more Anglicized during the eighteenth century.

When did the United States become a nation? Some historians contend that an embryonic American nationalism emerged as early as the seventeenth century with the idea, first articulated by the Puritans, that America was part of a providential mission to renovate the world and lead it toward liberty and equality. Stoking this sense of American purpose was an awareness by the colonists of significant differences between the Old and New Worlds: a rising standard of living, a large independent middle class, and greater economic and political opportunity. Uniting the disparate Americans was an historical memory of their common motivations for settling the New World and in subduing the American wilderness.

However, other historians argue that the colonists by the mid eighteenth century were becoming more “Anglicized,” not “Americanized,” as witnessed by their increasing consumption of British goods and their aping of British customs, manners, and clothing. The failure of Benjamin Franklin’s plan of union (1754), moreover, pointedly revealed the mutual suspicions and disunity among Americans. Not until the War of Independence, which was fought in a spirit of liberal nationalism—and which encouraged Americans to create uniquely American forms of art, literature, theater, and national symbols—did an embryonic American nationalism emerge.

This disagreement over the genesis of American nationhood reflects the fact that a sense of nationalism develops slowly, but erratically, and changes in intensity over time. Yet, the fluctuating nature of nationalism does not diminish its relevance. Indeed, the question of the relationship between American nationalism and the War of Independence is important because it forces historians to confront critical issues associated with the causes and consequences of this epochal event, as well as the reasons for American victory.

To help provide a common ground for debate, a basic definition of nationalism is in order. Nationalism is a state of mind among people residing within a certain territory who share a homogenous culture; who believe in a common destiny and a distinct existence from other people (even perhaps a superiority over all other similar entities that is expressed in an enthusiastic sense of loyalty to the nation and a desire to contribute to its welfare); and who are united by certain ties—political, racial, religious, cultural, linguistic, or historical.
Viewpoint:
Yes. Americans by the mid 1700s had developed a sense of nationalism resulting from increased political, economic, and cultural autonomy.

Was there an America before there was an American Revolution? The question has intrigued scholars of the period at least since 1818, when John Adams described the colonies as “thirteen clocks” and marveled that they had ever struck as one. Given the diversity of economy, demography, government, and settlement that characterized the English mainland colonies, Adams’s sense of them as thirteen separate entities is inarguable. The one thing many colonists shared with each other, moreover, was a sense of their rights and liberties as Englishmen; on the surface, that commonality would seem an unpromising material from which to create a collective identity as Americans. And yet, the clocks did all strike together and they did so, in no small measure, because of the interplay between the colonies’ distinctive conditions and the colonists’ claim of Britishness. By the time Patrick Henry announced in 1774 that “I am not a Virginian, but an American,” there had developed in the colonies a nascent American nationalism that made the Revolution possible.

Between 1680 and 1770 England’s mainland colonies developed in ways that made them distinctive from the mother country and, indeed, from any other contemporary society. Ethnic diversity was one of their most striking traits. By 1760, even in New England, the most homogenous region, 30 percent of the population was not of English descent; in the Middle Colonies, the figure was 70 percent. Irish, Scotch-Irish, Germans, Dutch, and Africans lived throughout the colonies; in the Southern colonies, those of African descent outnumbered all other groups. The colonies were also increasingly characterized by religious diversity, with eighteenth-century America being home to more varieties of Christianity than was any European society. Congregationalism and Anglicanism thrived, but so too did Quakerism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism and Reformed, and the Baptist churches. In the Middle and Southern colonies, no single group accounted for a majority of either congregations or believers.

Such diversity undoubtedly made America different from England. Yet, internal diversity alone would not have led colonists to think of themselves—or to want to think of themselves—as sharing a collective American identity. Indeed, eighteenth-century manuscripts abound with colonists’ expressions of mistrust for their fellows. In his 1762 will Lewis Morris commanded that his son receive the best possible education; that education, however, was under no circumstances to be acquired in Connecticut, where the boy might “imbibe in his youth that low Craft and cunning so Incident to the People of that Country.” Southerners, for their part, warned each other of the potentially hostile power of the “Goths and Vandals” of the North. Mid-Atlantic settlers of English descent, including Benjamin Franklin, worried that immigrants to the colonies were degrading their institutions and threatening their way of life.

The colonies never became homogenous, nor were colonists’ relationships ever entirely free of tensions and rivalries. Homogeneity and bland unity, however, were no more necessary ingredients of America’s nascent eighteenth-century nationalism than they would be of the nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century nationalisms that followed. Instead, the colonists’ assertive claims of what they believed to be their British liberties, combined with the British government’s competing view of the proper role of colonies and colonists within the Empire, slowly conspired to create a distinctive American identity out of distinctive circumstances.

One factor in the development of a collective American identity was the effort by England to govern its colonies in a firm and uniform manner that started in the late seventeenth century, continued throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, and accelerated after the French and Indian War (1754–1763). In the 1690s, faced with mainland colonies that included Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, and New York, in addition to the New England and Chesapeake regions, the British established the Board of Trade, the colonial customs service, and colonial admiralty courts. The result, although falling far short of a perfect mercantilist system, was the increased penetration of British authority into American daily life. British officials not only sought to “impose new patterns of uniformity” on the colonies, but also, because of their distance from America, imagined that the colonies already possessed a unity that they in reality lacked. According to historian John M. Murrin, America first existed as a united and distinct entity not in the minds of those devoted to the cause of an American nation but in the minds of those devoted to the cause of British empire. England’s efforts to control colonial trade and to prevent the colonies from exercising the united power British officials imagined they possessed were crucial factors in the creation of a real sense, among Americans, of shared identity and resentment.

Another function of empire that contributed to the creation of a nascent American nationalism were the many imperial wars of the
colonial period. Americans expressed pride in British successes and in their own role in them. They also aggressively asserted their loyalty to British Protestantism against Spanish and French absolutism and “popery.” Yet, colonists were notoriously loathe to leave their farms untended to serve with the British Army, and many felt that the colonies’ interests were overlooked when peace treaties were negotiated. The French and Indian War freed colonists from the threat that had been posed by France’s extensive North American territories, but it too highlighted Americans’ differences from the English. Indignant at the vast authority British officers held over their men and disturbed by the profanity and Sabbath breaking of British troops, some colonists who served expressed a resentment of British mores and power. “Although we be Englishmen born,” wrote one private in 1759, “we are debarred Englishmen’s liberty. . . . [The British soldiers] are but little better than slaves to their officers. And when I get out of their [power] I shall take care how I get in again.”

The private’s reference to “Englishmen’s liberty” draws attention to an element of colonial thought that was important first to the making of an imperial patriotism and then to the making of a distinctive American collective identity. Despite their discontents, Americans accepted their role as colonists throughout much of the eighteenth century exactly because that role seemed compatible with their deeper identity as Britons. This identity offered European Americans, whether of English descent or not, the protections of the Magna Carta (1215) and the unwritten British constitution. European Americans claimed for themselves the right to trial by jury, the right to be taxed by their own representatives, and the broader, foundational right of living under the rule of “King, Lords, and Commons” rather than under the kind of absolute monarchies that characterized the Continent.

Loyalty to their understanding of the British system of government was one factor uniting the diverse American colonists; participation in a transatlantic material and intellectual culture was another. An increased flow of British consumer goods to the colonies meant that American homes and clothing could follow British models more closely than they had in the seventeenth century, and a rise in the amount of British books, newspapers, and magazines available drew educated Americans into a virtual community of shared ideas and sentiment. When Americans first began to develop a shared identity, that is, they did so as Britons. “We were proud,” the Reverend Jeremy Belknap remembered, “of our connection with a nation whose flag was triumphal in every quarter of the globe.”
By considering themselves to be British, Americans were participating in the “greatly heightened articulation of national identity” that characterized England during the second half of the eighteenth century. The nature of “Britishness,” however, was not easily determined; rather, it was determined by different groups to mean different things. According to P. J. Marshall in an article in *Uniting the Kingdom?: The Making of British History*, edited by Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (1995), residents of England “could perhaps envisage a common community with the Welsh and, often with much difficulty, with the Scots, but they failed to incorporate the Irish or colonial Americans into their idea of nation.” British citizens living outside of England, in turn, a group that included not only Americans but Scots, Welsh, and Anglo-Irish, wished to claim a standing within the Empire equal to that of Englishmen, while also seeking to preserve distinctive elements of their own culture. The resulting tensions found dramatic expression in the gradual, often painful, movement of America toward independence.

Colonial Americans adamantly asserted both their Britishness and a sense of their land and institutions as distinctive from and even potentially superior to those of the mother country. Americans were deeply conscious of the facts that the colonies were home to a more widespread property ownership than that of England and that the colonies were not home to a titled aristocracy. Colonists were also proud, and protective, of the powerful local assemblies that limited the powers of British-appointed governors, of their relatively frequent elections, and of their relatively broad suffrage. These factors suggested to some that America was a better home for English republican institutions than was England itself.

Throughout the eighteenth century, colonists had also increasingly expressed an appreciation of the vastness and natural riches of their home. In the 1750s William Livingston described America’s inexhaustible magazine of wealth and argued that without it, “Great Britain must not only lose her former luster, but, dreadful even in thought! Cease to be any longer an independent power.” Franklin felt strongly that “the foundations of the future grandeur and stability of the British empire lie in America.” Given their sense of the power inherent in American land and their belief in the virtue residing in American institutions, colonists were not prepared to defer to the mother country’s view of how the Empire should be governed or of what being British meant. When the colonists’ view of the British constitution came to seem irrevocably divorced from that of the British government, according to historian Paul A. Varg, “their interpretation of it became the warp and woof of a new nationalism.” And when they began to feel that those whom they had considered their British brothers were treating them as second-class citizens, they felt a collective sense of humiliation and betrayal that was a necessary precondition to the Revolution.

Coming in conjunction with the long-term refusal of England to consider Americans their equals within the Empire, the actions of the British government between 1763 and 1775 were, in hindsight, predictably inflammatory. The Proclamation of 1763, as well as the Sugar (1764), Stamp (1765), Quartering (1765), Townshend (1767), Tea (1773), Quebec (1774), and Intolerable (1774) Acts seemed designed, in the view of increasing numbers of colonists, to strip them of both their rights and their identity as Britons. Ultimately, the government’s escalating efforts to keep America within the Empire were sufficient to convert colonists’ devotion to Britishness and British liberties from a bond of allegiance into a spur to independence.

Colonial discontent and resentment found expression in every region. Wealthy Southerners began to question their practice of sending sons to be educated in the mother country, and some began to view their debts to British merchants and middlemen as evidence of an unhealthful and corrupting dependence on what was coming to seem an alien, even a hostile, power. The slavery that shaped all aspects of Southern life, moreover, also played a role in the developing imperial crisis. British officials assumed that Southerners’ awareness of their potential vulnerability to acts of vengeance by the enslaved population would ensure the region’s loyalty to the Crown. Once again, however, a factor that would seem to be an obstacle to the development of American nationalism proved a spur to it, and once again British officials managed to turn imperial glue into imperial solvent. In 1775 the royal governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, tried to convince white Virginians of the perils of war by offering freedom to slaves who fought on the side of England. Dunmore expected his proclamation to intimidate Virginians into remaining loyal, but instead it convinced many that they owed no loyalty to a government that would conspire with their slaves against them. What further proof could be needed that Englishmen did not consider Americans their “British brothers,” and that Virginians should instead throw in their lot with their fellow colonists?

Other regions also developed a sense of Americanness in their own distinctive ways. New England had a long tradition of ministers giving sermons on civic occasions, and those sermons were often quite political in tone. During the imperial crisis, New England ministers began to rally their congregations to the Patriot cause,
proclaiming that America’s mission in the world had come to require that the colonies leave the Empire, as it had once required that the Puritans leave England. So influential were the region’s Patriot ministers that the outraged Tory Peter Oliver dubbed them the “Black Regiment,” and lay much of the blame for America’s separation from Britain on them. In the Middle Colonies, as well, ministers exhorted their flocks to the cause of resistance; a visiting John Adams was pleased to note that Philadelphia ministers “thunder and lighten every Sabbath” against the British. In all regions, moreover, colonial boycotts and the news of them in colonial presses furthered Americans’ understanding of themselves as a suffering, but a purposeful and potentially triumphant, community.

The colonists, in short, drew on their own traditions and turned to their own local voices of authority in responding to what they perceived as British threats to their liberties and dignity. They also, in the years just before the Revolution, took a turn in the opposite direction, appealing to ostensibly universal truths as they began to claim the role of defenders of rights granted not by England but by God. Aware of their internal diversity, unable to point to a long, indigenous political tradition of their own, and effectively excluded from full participation in the transtemporal British political community, colonists transformed “rights of Englishmen at common law” into “rights by a higher law.” As historian Timothy H. Breen explained, “A newly aggressive English state,” that is, “forced the Americans to leap out of history and to defend colonial and human equality on the basis of timeless natural rights.” This act of abstraction—incomplete as it was, given colonial slaveholding and Indian policies—was different from the claims of common history, traditions, and language that would forge other group identities, and it was the final element of America’s developing prerevolutionary nationalism.

America’s nascent nationalism was a function of Americans’ sense of their distinctive land and institutions, of the increased cohesion created by eighteenth-century British administrative policies, of the colonists’ claim of British liberties, and of colonial anger at imperial Acts and attitudes. Before the first shots were fired, Americans had also begun to imagine themselves part of a community grounded not in circumstance or tradition but in rights and equality. That they articulated and expressed allegiance to ideals their own society and polity did not yet fulfill suggests the challenges American nationalism would face in the years after the Revolution, as well as those it faced in the years before.

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Viewpoint:
No. Americans in 1776 were still too divided by differences in economy, demography, government, and settlement patterns to have developed a sense of nationalism; rather, the colonists were becoming more Anglicized during the eighteenth century.

Thoughtful people should in general avoid categorical assertions that dismiss nuance and complexity. By 1776 there were certain stirrings of national pride in the thirteen British North American colonies. Poems such as “The Rising Glory of America” (1772), written by Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Philip Freneau, which anticipated independence, suggested a growing excitement about the future prospects for Americans in North America. Yet, beyond question, the American Revolution resulted when Parliament’s actions forced British subjects in colonial North America to conclude that the British traditions and liberties they cherished were under assault. British colonial North Americans could articulate grievances, define categories in which to place injustices, and mobilize ideas to respond to the actions taken by Parliament primarily because during the eighteenth century they had increasingly and proudly identified themselves as Britons. As Britons they felt entitled to the freedoms, liberties, and respect that all British subjects were supposed to enjoy.

Thus, when Americans declared independence in 1776 they were not driven by a rising sense of American nationalism, a belief in a political and cultural legacy that made them distinct from Britain and Britons. Rather, independence resulted from a clear and all-encompassing eighteenth-century process of Anglicization in the thirteen colonies. The term Anglicization describes the interrelated series of social, cultural, political, and economic developments that by 1763 caused the American colonists to more completely embrace British models of governance, cultural and social ideals, and commercial policies than at any time ever before. Precisely because of this process of Anglicization, colonists in British North America declared their independence and by doing so destroyed the eighteenth-century British Empire.

A good practical definition of American nationalism is any idea or practice distinct from that of England or (after 1707 when England joined with Scotland) of Britain. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries one could argue that to be America was to be “not England,” to organize a polity and society distinct from the
way things were organized in England. Using this definition—to be unlike the English—it is clear that the colonies were much more American in the seventeenth century than they were in the eighteenth century. Indeed, as the eighteenth century progressed, the colonies became less and less American.

Each of the original thirteen colonies began as efforts to show England, by superior example, what it ought to be doing. Pious men and women founded the New England colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire because they were disgusted with England, which they considered corrupt and sinful. The duke of York (the future James II, King of England from 1685 to 1688) organized New York as an experiment in royal absolutism. By properly governing New York, he hoped to show his brother, Charles II, King of England from 1660 to 1685, how to improve English government and society. Pennsylvania and Maryland started as experiments in religious toleration. They were part of efforts to lead England away from the hostility shown worshipers who were not part of the Anglican Church of England. Virginia (which split into North Carolina and South Carolina in 1701) began as a utopian society organized around the constitutional and political principles of a radical English theorist named James Harrington. The organizers of Carolina (who included John Locke) expected to show England how a truly decent society conducted its affairs.

Thus, virtually all of the colonies began with a rejection of English society and, to a certain extent, of English culture. These seventeenth-century colonies were consciously "not England." Virginia was the only important colony that did not begin as a social experiment to be better than England. However, Virginia quickly developed into a uniquely American society. By the 1640s Virginia's economy was devoted almost exclusively to one crop, tobacco, while England had a diversified agricultural economy. Virginia was very much a two-class society of brutal, exploitative landowners and unfree indentured servants while England possessed a rising middle class and a declining peasantry. There were no illusions that Virginia was improving on English practices, but as with all the other seventeenth-century colonies, it was overwhelmingly "American."

The "American" nature of the seventeenth-century colonies was evident between 1650 and 1700 when English officials sought to enforce parliamentary legislation within the increasingly autonomous colonies and to organize them into an empire directed from the mother country. Beginning in 1651 Parliament tried to organize the colonies into a coherent commercial empire with a series of Navigation Acts that aimed to direct colonial trade and organize the colonial economies to supplement that of England. The colonies universally ignored this imperial legislation. Virginia traded with the Dutch, and New England purchased French molasses; in the process, the colonies made it clear to Whitehall that they did not think they existed to serve England or assist it in strengthening its economy. During the Glorious Revolution (1688), when the English deposed one king and replaced him with another, royal authority was so decrepit in the colonies that Americans from Massachusetts to Carolina overthrew it in a matter of weeks.

But between 1689 and 1730 many things changed, which encouraged Americans to consciously model their societies after various aspects of English culture and society. This dramatic transformation resulted from the profound change that occurred within England during these years. After the Glorious Revolution, England developed a unique and profoundly successful society. England became the world's only limited constitutional monarchy where elected, accountable officials controlled all money matters, particularly taxation. The Glorious Revolution precipitated a cycle of wars with France that did not truly end until Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat in 1815. These wars brought unprecedented expense and necessitated the pioneering invention of public-funded and perpetual state debt. Between 1694 and 1783 the public debt of England rose from £1,000,000 to £2,833,000,000. England proved capable of undertaking such a commitment because its political system made those who did the taxing accountable and therefore trustworthy. They could tax regularly, pay interest on the debt, and so borrow tremendous sums while actually only needing to service the debt (in other words, pay the interest) with a fraction of the total borrowed.

The vast sums of money available to the English state after 1689 allowed it to wage war and acquire territory more effectively than any nation since ancient Rome. In particular, by 1740 the British Navy dominated the oceans. Military might and commercial domination served to justify the Glorious Revolution and the political and cultural changes that it started. By 1715 Parliament, not an absolute monarch, was the sovereign power, a sharp departure from other European political forms. More than any other European nation, the British government tolerated all Protestant sects and better protected basic liberties of speech, assembly, and property. By 1750 most enlightened Europeans viewed Britain as the most liberal and advanced society of the modern world.

This political transformation brought to Britain unprecedented political stability. Prime ministers such as Robert Walpole (1721–1742) governed
ASSESSING THE AMERICAN TEMPER

On 13 February 1766 the House of Commons examined Benjamin Franklin about the “temper of America towards Great Britain before 1763.” Franklin replied that it was “the best in the world”; the colonies, he explained:

Submitted willingly to the government of the crown, and paid, in their courts, obedience to acts of parliament. Numerous as the people are in several old provinces, they cost you nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection. They were governed by this country at the expense only of a little pen, ink, and paper. They were led by a thread. They had not only a respect, but an affection for Great Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce. Natives of Britain were always treated with particular regard; to be an Old-England man was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.

And what is their temper now?—O, very much altered.

Did you ever hear the authority of parliament to make laws for America questioned till lately?—The authority of parliament was allowed to be valid in all laws, except such as should lay internal taxes. It was never disputed in laying duties to regulate commerce.

In what light did the people of America use to consider the parliament of Great Britain?—They consider the parliament as the great bulwark and security of their liberties and privileges, and always spoke of it with the utmost respect and veneration. Arbitrary ministers, they thought, might possibly, at times, attempt to oppress them; but they relied on it, that the parliament, on application, would always give redress. They remembered, with gratitude, a strong instance of this, when a bill was brought into parliament, with a clause to make royal instructions laws in the colonies, which the House of Commons would not pass, and it was thrown out.

And have they not still the same respect for parliament?—No; it is greatly lessened.

To what causes is that owing?—To a concurrence of causes; the restraints lately laid on their trade, by which the bringing of foreign gold and silver into the colonies was prevented; the prohibition of making paper money among themselves; and then demand a new and heavy tax by stamps; taking away at the same time, trials by juries, and refusing to receive and hear their humble petitions.


effectively by utilizing all the modern political and economic developments. Walpole realized that the public debt and expanding empire vastly increased the amount of patronage available to him. The ris-
with representation, toleration for all Protestants, protection of private property, and basic liberties that enlightened individuals viewed as natural rights. Britons on both sides of the ocean compared Britain to its archenemy France. France was Catholic; Britain was Protestant. France’s monarchy was absolutist, Britain’s was limited and constitutional. France was poor; Britain was prosperous. By 1750 Britons believed that all these things fit together. Protestantism, prosperity, and liberty were engaged in a bitter struggle against Catholicism, poverty, and tyranny. Only the British Empire protected the basic rights that made life worth living, rights that only Britons, on both sides of the ocean, were lucky enough to enjoy.

This change in colonial attitudes is seen most clearly during the French and Indian War (1754–1763). It was, to that point, the bloodiest and most expensive of the wars that Britain fought with France. After 1758 colonists taxed themselves at record levels to help fund the war; they paid for barracks to quarter British troops; and, after some initial misunderstanding, colonial officers willingly subordinated themselves and their men to British officers of equal or greater rank. With the eager assistance of the colonists, Britain managed to expel France from North America.

At the same time, American culture and society was also becoming more “Anglicized,” that is, English. This transformation is most conspicuously illustrated in the creation of “great houses” by planters and merchants after 1720. In the Southern colonies, planters constructed palatial country mansions styled after the English country manors. Likewise, wealthy Northern merchants built urban mansions that followed an English townhouse pattern. With English-style homes, genteel Americans also sought to acquire English grace and manners appropriate for their social and economic status. To that end, they paid close attention to countenance, bearing, and speech. Wealthy Americans increasingly sent their sons to England for their education, an important part of which was to acquire proper English manners and speech. Those who could not afford to go to England learned the finer points of genteel behavior through English “courtesy” books. Thus, at least among the elite, houses were similar (despite regional variations), and learning, manners, and dress were comparable.

This Anglicization is also seen in the birth of an Anglo-American consumer society by the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, the American market for English imported goods increased 120 percent between 1750 and 1773. By the early 1770s, for example, New York monthly journals listed more than nine thousand different English manufactured goods available for purchase. This new consumer market provided Americans of all social and economic classes and of all regions with a common vocabulary, a common element of personal experience, and a standardization of taste. As Americans purchased the same British manufactured goods, they became increasingly Anglicized. In the process, it drew the colonists closer to the culture of the mother country and greater dependency.

After the French and Indian War (1754–1763), however, a great deal changed in Britain that weakened the political ties between America and the mother country. Parliament abruptly shifted tactics by taxing the colonies directly, ordering the colonies to quarter troops in their homes, and sending British troops to America to force the colonists to comply with this unpopular legislation. In doing so, Parliament abandoned the methods it had used to get the colonists to voluntarily pay taxes, quarter troops, and obey the British military. During the war the colonists had taxed themselves at far higher levels than Parliament demanded after 1763. They had done so because Parliament allowed their own colonial assemblies to determine their financial contributions to the Crown. The colonists therefore believed that they possessed the British rights of taxation with representation and security of property. When Parliament began to demand taxes after 1763, the colonists believed that this approach violated their British liberties. Because of sixty years of increasing pride in Britain and their own British identity, the colonists knew what liberties Britons possessed. Their very identification with Britain—and their devotion to British liberty, property, Protestantism, and natural rights—allowed them to understand and articulate why Parliament, whose members they did not vote for and to which they sent no representatives, should not tax them. The more British the colonists became, the angrier they grew as Parliament, in their eyes, was destroying the liberties it was supposed to protect.

As the conflict over how best to structure and protect British liberty grew more intense, Parliament finally opted for a military solution. The colonists did not necessarily despise the British military. They had willingly subordinated themselves to it during the French and Indian War. But after 1765 the military, like Parliament, suddenly looked like the enemy and not the protector of British liberty. Increasingly, the classical republicanism that had been marginal in Britain appeared to make sense in the colonies. Clearly wealth and power had corrupted Britain. British liberty was no longer safe within the Empire. To protect and enjoy it, to structure life around it, one had to leave that Empire. The colonists’ very Britishness allowed them to understand and explain why the way Britain treated them was wrong. And when they did so, they looked to a British language of political opposition to help them to understand the situation they now faced. Anglicization
allowed eighteenth-century Britain and its colonies to forge the most powerful Empire the world had seen in 1,500 years. And this same process of Anglicization broke that Empire apart thirteen years after it reached its zenith.

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