APUSH LEQ Example: Causes of the American Revolution

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PROMPT

Evaluate the relative importance of the causes of the American Revolution in the period 1754 to 1776.

Model response

In 1754 most British colonists in North America saw themselves as loyal subjects who enjoyed the rights of Englishmen, and the colonies had governed many local affairs through their own assemblies for decades under a loose system of imperial oversight. The Seven Years' War, fought in North America from 1754 to 1763, ended that arrangement. **Although Britain's new taxes after 1763 were the immediate trigger for colonial protest, the most important cause of the American Revolution was the constitutional conflict over who held authority to govern the colonies, which turned disputes over taxation into a struggle over self-government and finally independence.**

The war itself created the conditions for conflict. Britain's victory left it with a large war debt and a vast new territory to defend, and Parliament reasonably expected the colonies to share the cost. The Proclamation of 1763, which barred settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains, angered colonists who had fought partly to open those lands. Revenue measures followed: the Sugar Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765, which taxed printed materials directly. Economic grievances were real, but they do not by themselves explain why colonists moved toward rebellion; many paid higher duties in other forms without revolting.

The key shift came when colonists framed taxation as a question of constitutional rights. Delegates to the Stamp Act Congress in 1765 argued that only their own elected assemblies could tax them, and boycotts and protests forced Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act in 1766. Parliament immediately passed the Declaratory Act, asserting its right to legislate for the

colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” The Townshend Acts of 1767 tested that claim again, and the Boston Massacre of 1770, in which British soldiers killed five colonists, showed how a dispute over authority could turn violent. Even after most Townshend duties were repealed, Parliament kept the tax on tea as a symbol of its power, which is why the Tea Act of 1773 provoked the Boston Tea Party despite actually lowering the price of tea.

Britain’s response to the Tea Party transformed resistance into revolution. The Coercive Acts of 1774 closed Boston’s port and altered Massachusetts’s charter, convincing many colonists that Parliament threatened self-government in every colony, not just Massachusetts. The First Continental Congress met in 1774 to coordinate resistance, and fighting began at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Ideas then turned resistance into independence: Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, attacked monarchy itself, and the Declaration of Independence in July 1776 justified separation by appealing to natural rights and listing violations of colonial self-government.

Some historians emphasize economic interests, and merchants, debtors and land speculators certainly had material reasons to resist British policy. However, the sequence of events shows that economic measures repeatedly became explosive only when colonists interpreted them as threats to representative government. The conflict over authority, intensified by Britain’s coercive responses, best explains why a dispute over revenue ended in a war for independence.

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