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In May of 1775, colonial leaders convened a second Continental Congress in Philadelphia to debate their next move. Beyond their meeting hall, however, events continued moving quickly, as minutemen and British soldiers clashed in a bloody battle outside Boston, and an increasingly furious King George readied his country for war.

The loyalties that divided colonists sparked endless debates at the Second Continental Congress. John Adams of Massachusetts suggested a sweeping, radical plan—that each colony set up its own government and that the Congress declare the colonies independent. Furthermore, he argued, the Congress should consider the militiamen besieging Boston to be the Continental Army and name a general to lead them. Moderate John Dickinson of Pennsylvania strongly disagreed with Adams’s call for revolt. In private, he confronted Adams.

“What is the reason, Mr. Adams, that you New England men oppose our measures of reconciliation? . . . If you don’t concur with us in our pacific system, I and a number of us will break off from you in New England, and we will carry on the opposition by ourselves in our own way.” – John Dickinson (*Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution*)

The debates raged on into June, but one stubborn fact remained: colonial militiamen were still encamped around Boston. The Congress agreed to recognize them as the Continental Army and appointed as its commander a 43-year-old veteran of the French and Indian War, George Washington. The Congress, acting like an independent government, also authorized the printing of paper money to pay the troops and organized a committee to deal with foreign nations. These actions came just in time.

Main Idea:

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Cooped up in Boston, British General Thomas Gage decided to strike at militiamen who had dug in on Breed’s Hill, north of the city and near Bunker Hill. On the steamy summer morning of June 17, 1775, Gage sent out nearly 2,400 British troops. The British, sweating in wool uniforms and heavy packs, began marching up Breed’s Hill in their customary broad lines. The colonists held their fire until the last minute, then began to shoot down the advancing redcoats. The surviving British troops made a second attack, and then a third. The third assault succeeded, but only because the militiamen ran low on ammunition.

By the time the smoke cleared, the colonists had lost 450 men, while the British had suffered over 1,000

casualties. The misnamed Battle of Bunker Hill would prove to be the deadliest battle of the war.

By July, the Second Continental Congress was readying the colonies for war while still hoping for peace. Most of the delegates, like most colonists, felt deep loyalty to George III and blamed the bloodshed on the king’s ministers. On July 8, 1775, the Congress sent the king the so-called Olive Branch Petition, urging a return to “the former harmony” between Britain and the colonies.

King George flatly rejected the petition. Furthermore, he issued a proclamation stating that the colonies were in rebellion and urged Parliament to order a naval blockade of the American coast.

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The exact number of Loyalists—those who opposed independence and remained loyal to the Crown—is unknown. Many with Loyalist sympathies changed sides as the war progressed. Some Loyalists felt a special tie to the king because they had served as judges, councilors, or governors. Most Loyalists, however, were ordinary people of modest means. They included some people who lived far from the cities and knew little of the events that turned other colonists into revolutionaries. Other people remained loyal because they thought that the British were going to win the war and they wanted to avoid being punished as rebels. Still others were Loyalists because they thought that the crown would protect their rights more effectively than the new colonial governments would.

Patriots drew their numbers from people who saw economic opportunity in an independent America. The Patriot cause embraced farmers, artisans, merchants, landowners, and elected officials. German colonists in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and

Virginia also joined the fight for independence. While Patriots made up nearly half the population, many Americans remained neutral.

The conflict presented dilemmas for other groups as well. The Quakers generally supported the Patriots but did not fight because they did not believe in war. Many African Americans fought on the side of the Patriots, while others joined the Loyalists since the British promised freedom to slaves who would fight for the crown. Most Native Americans supported the British because they viewed colonial settlers as a bigger threat to their lands.

Now the colonies were plunged into two wars—a war for independence and a civil war in which Americans found themselves on opposing sides. The price of choosing sides could be high. In declaring their independence, the Patriots had invited war with the mightiest empire on earth.

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