Chapter 6 Lesson 2

Gaining Allies

By late 1777, Benjamin Franklin had been in France for a year trying to gain support for the American cause. They had provided money secretly but had not entered the war. Jonathan Austin of Boston was sent to tell the news of the victory at Saratoga. Franklin understanding this news recognized it has a turning point for the war.

February 1778 France decided to help the Americans and declared war on Britain and sent money, equipment, and troops to aid the Americans. Spain also decided to help the Americans, they did not form an alliance but declared war on Britain in 1779. Spanish forces fought the British in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida.

Winter at Valley Forge

The American people did not hear about the alliance with France until the spring of 1778. British General Howe spent the winter in Philadelphia. Washington’s troops camped through a terrible winter in Valley Forge about 20 miles to the west. They lacked decent food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Washington’s largest challenge was keeping the troops together and morale high.

Snowstorms damaged roads and slowed delivery of supplies. They built huts and scavenged from the countryside, volunteers including Martha Washington made clothes for the troops and took care of the sick. Washington declared no army had ever put up with “such uncommon hardships” with such spirit. “Naked and starving as they are” he wrote, “we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery.”

Most of the men lacked blankets, shoes and shirts. Some made shoes from scraps of cowhide. Many soldiers became sick and died. Some even deserted with even officers quitting. The Continental Army seemed to be falling apart yet it did survive. When spring came new soldiers joined and conditions improved.

In April 1778, Washington told his troops of France’s help. The Army celebrated with a religious service and a parade.

Foreigners Help on the Battlefield

Several foreign nationals helped the American cause:

Marquis de Lafayette a 19 year old volunteer in June 1777, served as an aide to Washington and agreed to serve without pay. He was motivated by the ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski (Polish nationals) supported American efforts. Kosciuszko helped build important defenses and Pulaski won the promotion to General, he died in 1779 fighting for the Colonial Army.

Friedrich von Stueben an officer from the Prussian army helped train troops at Valley Forge turning them into more effective troops.

Juan de Miralles (Spanish) 1778 arrived in Philadelphia, he persuaded Spain, Cuba and Mexico to donate money to the United States.

Almost 2/3 of the Pennsylvania regiments were foreign-born. Even with this foreign aid the Patriots still needed money to fight the war.

Life on the Home Front

Hardships of the soldiers was considerable but so was what the families who stayed behind. Wives had to take care of the farms and businesses and children had to make do without a father present.

Problems in the Economy

The Continental Congress did not have the power to tax, they did receive some money from states and foreign governments. Yet it wasn’t enough, their solution was to print hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of paper money. This money quickly lost it value, the amount being printed surpassed the amount of gold and silver backing them. This led to inflation, taking more and more money to buy the same amount of goods. Congress stopped printing money because no one would use it. Leaving the Americans with no way to finance their fight for independence.

New Ways of Thinking

The ideals of liberty and freedom that inspired the American Revolution also inspired some women to question their role in American society. Abigail Adams was one example:

“I can not say that I think you are very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives.”

Questioning Slavery

1778 Governor William Livingston of New Jersey asked his government to free all enslaved peoples. He said slavery was “utterly inconsistent with the principles of Christianity and humanity.”

African Americans fought for the American cause and hoped the Revolution would help end slavery. In 1780, Pennsylvania adopted a plan to gradually free enslaved people – the first legislature in the world to do this. Other northern states soon took similar measures, though the issue of slavery was still not resolved.

Treatment of Loyalists

Many Loyalists fled, packing their belongings and selling whatever they could. Some left for England still others took off for Spanish controlled Florida. Those that remained behind faced difficult times. Neighbors shunned them, some faced violence, others that actively helped the British faced arrest. In a few rare cases, Patriots executed Loyalists.