Chapter 6 Lesson 4

The Final Years

The Victory at Yorktown

In the North the French troops had finally arrived. Led by Comte de Rochambeau they met up with General Washington outside NY City. They were waiting on a second French fleet to arrive, once it did they would attack NY. The second French fleet never did arrive in NY. Instead the ships and troops found a better opportunity to strike at the British, Yorktown VA.

Washington leaves for Virginia

Following reports of fighting in the South, Washington sent General Lafayette and Anthony Wayne to VA to stop Cornwallis. Lafayette had Cornwallis pinned down on the peninsula of Yorktown.

The French fleet had blockaded Cornwallis’s retreat and Washington had a new strategy, which he kept secret. He wanted Clinton to think that the Patriots still planned to attack New York, hoping to trick Clinton to not sending troops to Cornwallis.

Washington and Rochambeau rushed south with their troops with most soldiers not having any idea of where they were headed. One wrote, “We do not know the object of our march, and are in perfect ignorance whether we are going against New York, or …Virginia.”

The French and American troops marched 200 miles in 15 days, Clinton did not learn they were gone until it was too late. There was nothing he could do to stop the 3 forces – Lafayette’s troops, Washington’s and Rochambeau’s army and the French fleet – from meeting at Yorktown.

A Trap at Yorktown

By the end of September, 14,000 Patriot and French forces faced Cornwallis’s 8,000 British and Hessian troops at Yorktown. The French fleet kept guard at Chesapeake Bay preventing British troops from rescuing or resupplying Cornwallis. The British were trapped and the American and French forces laid siege to the British (blocked off the British supply and escape routes). In this way they hoped to force the British to surrender.

Victory Over Cornwallis

The siege began to take effect. The British ran low on supplies, many soldiers were sick or wounded. On October 14, Alexander Hamilton led an attack that captured key British defenses. On October 19 he surrendered his troops. They took nearly 8,000 British prisoners and captured more than 200 guns.

At the surrender ceremony, the British marched between rows of French and American troops. The French played “Yankee Doodle”, the song the British had used to taunt the Americans. The British played a child’s song “The World Turned Upside Down”.

Independence Achieved

Patriot victory at Yorktown was a terrible blow to the British. Even though Cornwallis surrendered the fighting continued. However, the British were convinced the war was too costly to pursue or continue.

The Americans and British sent delegates to Paris to work out a treaty. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and John Jay represented the US. The American Congress ratified the first draft of the treaty in April 1783, the final Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783. By that time Britain had made peace with France and Spain.

Under the Treaty of Paris, Great Britain recognized the US as a nation, promising to withdraw all their troops and giving Americans fishing rights off the coast of Canada. The Americans agreed to pay British merchants what they owed them and advise the new states to return property taken from the Loyalists.

A Conspiracy Against Congress

Many months passed between the end of fighting and the signing of the peace treaty. Washington did not want to disband the army, instead he camped his idle troops outside of Newburgh, NY. Many soldiers believed they were owed pay, when this pay did not come soldiers grew angry. Some officers sent a letter in March 1783, if their demands were not met the army should use force against Congress. Washington realizing the danger of this urged Congress to meet their demands. Congress agreed, Washington’s leadership ended the threat to the new nation.

Washington Returns Home

In late November 1783, the war truly ended. The last British troops left NYC. Washington could at last give up his command. On December 4, Washington said farewell to his troops. 3 weeks later he formally resigned at a meeting of the Congress. “Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire …and take my leave of all the employment of public life.” Washington returned to Mount Vernon, there he planned to live quietly with his family.

Why the Americans Won

How did the Americans defeat powerful Great Britain?

1. Americans fought on their own land. The British had to move troops and supplies across an ocean. It was harder for them to get reinforcements. When the ships were blocked, the British troops had no support.
2. Americans knew the land. They knew where to lay an ambush. They were expert at controlling the American countryside once they occupied the cities.
3. Help from other countries contributed as well. French soldiers and ships, Spanish aid and attacking of the British. Individuals such as Lafayette and von Steuben.
4. A People’s Movement, the outcome was not dependent on one battle or event but on the determination and spirit of the Patriots.

In 1776 the Americans began a revolution, outlining principles of freedom and the rights they felt all peoples and nations should have. This inspired French rebels in 1789 to fight for “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.” The French upheld these principles: “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”

1791, a revolution in the French colony of Saint Dominque was inspired by the ideals of the American and French revolutions, enslaved Africans took up arms. Led by a man named Toussaint L’Overture and soon shook off French rule. In 1804 Santo Domingo – present-day Haiti – became the second nation in the Americas to achieve independence from colonial rule. “We have asserted our rights,” declared the revolutionaries. “We swear never to yield them to any power on earth.”