

CHOOSING SIDES

Sections 4-6: Can a Virtuous Man Hesitate? | Rebellion to Tyrants | A Scene of Horror and Distress

CENTRAL QUESTION When protest became war, why did neighbors, friends, and even fathers and sons reach opposite conclusions about duty, liberty, and legitimate government?

THE CHOOSING-SIDES TIMELINE

1774	Galloway proposes imperial union	APR 1775	Lexington and Concord begin the war
JUN 1775	Washington accepts command	NOV 1775	Dunmore offers conditional freedom
MAR 1776	British and Loyalists leave Boston	JUN 1776	William Franklin is arrested
JUL 1776	Congress declares independence	1776-77	New York defeats; Trenton and Princeton

From Disagreement to Decision

Part 1 explained how confidence in the British Empire weakened. Part 2 asks what happened when argument became armed confrontation. Americans could no longer disagree only about taxes or representation; they had to decide which government deserved obedience and what risks they would accept.

- **The Patriot argument:** A government that threatened inherited liberty could forfeit the obedience of free people.
- **The Loyalist argument:** Political disagreement did not justify destroying lawful authority or breaking the empire apart.
- **The human reality:** Office, family ties, neighborhood pressure, property, fear, and personal conviction all shaped the choice.

READING LENS Do not ask merely who was right. Ask why each side believed the other was creating the greater danger.

Three Movements in Part 2

- **Section 4:** Violence at Lexington and Concord turns political hesitation into a moral and military decision.
- **Section 5:** Independence transforms rebellion into a declared new political identity and divides the Franklin family.
- **Section 6:** Occupation, retreat, displacement, and battlefield losses show the immediate human cost of choosing sides.

CAN A VIRTUOUS MAN HESITATE?

The first fighting forces Americans to decide whether resistance or obedience best serves the public good.

TITLE IDEA After Lexington and Concord, Washington described a tragic choice between bloodshed and subjugation - then asked whether a virtuous person could hesitate.

Lexington, Concord, and the Break

On April 19, 1775, British troops and Massachusetts militia fought at Lexington and Concord. News traveled rapidly through the colonies. The conflict no longer looked like a distant constitutional dispute: British soldiers and American colonists had shed one another's blood.

- **For supporters of resistance:** The fighting confirmed that British power might be used to compel submission.
- **For defenders of the Crown:** Armed resistance looked like rebellion against lawful government.
- **For moderates:** The possibility of compromise narrowed precisely when compromise became most necessary.

Washington Chooses the Cause

Washington was a prosperous Virginia planter with much to lose: property, position, reputation, and the security of his family. Nevertheless, he concluded that defending colonial liberties justified extraordinary risk. In June 1775, the Continental Congress selected him to command its army.

- **Why Washington mattered:** His selection helped make a New England conflict a broader continental cause.
- **The personal wager:** Military failure could mean disgrace, financial loss, or punishment as a rebel.
- **The moral claim:** Resistance was represented as duty, not simply anger or personal ambition.

BOOK CLUB TAKEAWAY Washington's question sounds certain only after one accepts his definition of virtue. Loyalists defined virtue differently.

CAN A VIRTUOUS MAN HESITATE?

Congress fights, petitions the king, and discovers that the middle ground is disappearing.

War Without Independence - Yet

The Second Continental Congress organized an army while still trying to repair relations with Britain. Its Olive Branch Petition appealed to King George III, revealing how many leaders hoped the imperial connection might survive even after fighting began.

- **The contradiction:** Americans armed for war while professing continued attachment to the king.
- **The British response:** The king refused to receive the petition, making reconciliation harder to defend.
- **The political result:** People favoring caution increasingly appeared weak, unreliable, or disloyal to both sides.

Boston, Bunker Hill, and Fear

The siege of Boston and the Battle of Bunker Hill demonstrated that the conflict would impose real casualties. In March 1776, Washington's fortification of Dorchester Heights helped force the British evacuation of Boston. More than a thousand Loyalist civilians departed with them.

- **A Patriot victory:** The British departure suggested that disciplined resistance could succeed.
- **A Loyalist disaster:** Families who trusted royal protection confronted exile, uncertainty, and lost homes.
- **A warning:** The same event could mean liberation to one household and catastrophe to another.

Ask While Reading

- Did Washington choose rebellion because he rejected Britain, or because he believed Britain had rejected colonial liberty?
- When did neutrality become harder than taking sides?

REBELLION TO TYRANTS

Independence converts a dispute within the empire into an explicit claim of national legitimacy.

TITLE IDEA On July 4, 1776, Benjamin Franklin proposed the motto “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God” for a prospective national seal.

How Rebellion Became a Duty

Franklin’s proposed motto captured a dramatic reversal. Obedience to rulers had traditionally signaled political order; now resistance could be presented as obedience to a higher moral principle. The argument depended on persuading Americans that British policy had become tyranny rather than legitimate government.

- **A new vocabulary:** Liberty, natural rights, consent, and resistance displaced appeals for ordinary imperial adjustment.
- **A moral inversion:** Rebellion could become honorable, while continued obedience could appear shameful.
- **A Loyalist objection:** Calling government tyrannical did not automatically prove that revolution was lawful or prudent.

Declaring Independence

Congress voted for independence on July 2, 1776, and adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4. Thomas Jefferson drafted the document; John Adams and Benjamin Franklin helped revise it. Its argument defended separation through rights, consent, and a catalog of grievances against the king.

- **For Patriots:** Independence created a cause worthy of sacrifice and invited recognition from foreign powers.
- **For Loyalists:** The declaration transformed disagreement into a formal act of treason against the Crown.
- **For the undecided:** Political labels now carried immediate consequences for property, safety, and community standing.

IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

Independence was voted on July 2; the Declaration’s text was adopted on July 4; most signatures came later.

REBELLION TO TYRANTS

The Franklin family reveals how the same ideals and circumstances could produce opposite loyalties.

Benjamin and William Franklin

Benjamin Franklin increasingly embraced independence. His son William, the royal governor of New Jersey, remained committed to the Crown and to the government he had sworn to serve. Their disagreement became the book's most personal illustration of political division inside a family.

- **Benjamin's reasoning:** British conduct had undermined colonial rights and made separation increasingly necessary.
- **William's reasoning:** Allegiance, lawful office, stability, and reconciliation remained obligations worth defending.
- **The breaking point:** New Jersey authorities arrested William in June 1776 and sent him under guard to Connecticut.

FAMILY TRAGEDY Father and son did not simply prefer different policies; they came to recognize different governments as legitimate.

Galloway and the Lost Middle

Joseph Galloway had proposed an imperial union in which a colonial legislature would cooperate with the British Parliament. The First Continental Congress rejected the proposal by a narrow vote in 1774. As war intensified, his effort to preserve both colonial rights and imperial unity lost political space.

- **The alternative:** An American governing body might have addressed colonial concerns without immediate independence.
- **Why it failed:** Competing ideas about final authority made shared sovereignty difficult to define.
- **The larger lesson:** Moderates can become enemies when political movements require increasingly absolute commitments.

Ask While Reading

- Was William Franklin preserving principle, protecting office, or doing both?
- Could an imperial compromise have survived once Americans and British troops had begun killing one another?

A SCENE OF HORROR AND DISTRESS

The consequences of political allegiance appear in defeat, occupation, displacement, and human suffering.

READING EMPHASIS The language of liberty becomes inseparable from the experience of frightened civilians, vulnerable families, imprisoned opponents, and armies struggling to survive.

New York and a War Nearly Lost

After leaving Boston, British forces concentrated against New York. In August 1776, Washington suffered a major defeat on Long Island. A nighttime evacuation preserved much of his army, but further British advances forced the Americans out of Manhattan and across New Jersey.

- **Military imbalance:** British naval power, professional troops, and allied German forces placed immense pressure on the Continental Army.
- **Washington's achievement:** Preserving the army mattered more than holding every city or winning every battle.
- **Political danger:** Repeated defeats encouraged Loyalists and weakened confidence in the Patriot cause.

Occupied Places, Divided Homes

Military control changed what allegiance meant in everyday life. British-occupied New York became an important refuge for Loyalists, while Patriot-controlled communities investigated suspected opponents. Families faced confiscation, interrogation, displacement, or pressure to prove their loyalty.

- **For Loyalists:** British protection offered safety, employment, and continuity but could require abandoning homes.
- **For Patriots:** Civilian cooperation with the British seemed dangerous during an existential military struggle.
- **For families:** Public choices could separate spouses, parents, children, and neighbors who had previously depended on one another.

CIVIL-WAR TEST If control of a town changes, does yesterday's loyal citizen become today's traitor?

A SCENE OF HORROR AND DISTRESS

Enslaved people, Indigenous nations, and desperate armies confront different meanings of freedom and survival.

Freedom Meant Different Things

Political allegiance looked different to enslaved people. In November 1775, Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom to enslaved people belonging to rebels if they escaped and served the British cause. The offer was conditional and uneven, but it exposed the contradiction between Patriot liberty and American slavery.

- **For freedom seekers:** The relevant question was which side offered the best chance to escape bondage.
- **For slaveholders:** British recruitment threatened property, labor, security, and the existing social order.
- **For historians:** Calling one side simply "pro-freedom" conceals whose freedom was actually protected.

Indigenous Nations Weigh Survival

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy faced its own divisions. Mohawk communities and other nations often viewed the British alliance as a defense against colonial land expansion; many Oneida and Tuscarora people supported the American cause. Their choices centered on land, diplomacy, security, and survival.

Trenton and Princeton Restore Hope

By late 1776, the American cause appeared fragile. Washington crossed the Delaware River on Christmas night, attacked the Hessian garrison at Trenton on December 26, and defeated British troops at Princeton on January 3, 1777. These victories restored confidence but did not erase the misery caused by the campaign.

- **Strategic effect:** The victories disrupted British expectations of an easy collapse.
- **Psychological effect:** Patriot morale revived, and military survival became politically meaningful.
- **Civilian reality:** Local communities continued to endure displacement, scarcity, suspicion, and competing claims of loyalty.

BOOK CLUB TAKEAWAY Patriot survival required military success, but the struggle also forced Americans to decide which neighbors could be trusted.

Ask While Reading

- Whose experience best reveals the civil-war character of the Revolution: a soldier, a Loyalist refugee, an enslaved freedom seeker, or an Indigenous leader?

SYNTHESIS & DISCUSSION

The same conflict produced rival definitions of loyalty, liberty, legitimate authority, and betrayal.

WHY AMERICANS CHOSE DIFFERENT SIDES

Question	Patriot reasoning	Loyalist reasoning
Duty	Resist abusive power; protect liberty.	Honor lawful allegiance; preserve order.
Authority	Government rests on consent.	Parliament and Crown possess legitimate authority.
Resistance	Pressure and armed defense can be justified.	Crowds and rebellion threaten civil society.
Greatest fear	Subordination and political dependence.	Anarchy, civil war, and a reckless break.
Betrayal	Obedience enables oppression.	Rebellion abandons inherited obligations.

How the Main Figures Choose

- **George Washington:** Accepts military command and treats resistance as an obligation to defend public liberty.
- **Benjamin Franklin:** Moves from imperial reform toward independence and a moral justification for rebellion.
- **William Franklin:** Defends royal authority, refuses the Patriot political transformation, and becomes a prisoner.
- **Joseph Galloway:** Finds his compromise position squeezed between imperial power and revolutionary mobilization.

Five Themes to Carry Forward

- **Legitimacy:** Both sides argued that they were defending proper government.
- **Virtue:** The meaning of moral duty depended on which danger seemed greatest.
- **Family:** Political allegiance could overpower personal loyalty.
- **Freedom:** Enslaved and Indigenous people faced choices not captured by a simple Patriot-Loyalist divide.

- **Coercion:** War made neutrality difficult and transformed political suspicion into practical punishment.

Questions for the Entire Section

- Does Brands make Loyalist choices understandable without asking readers to endorse them?
- When liberty requires coercing a neighbor, who decides which side is defending freedom?

DISCUSSION & SOURCES

Eight discussion questions, a one-minute spoken summary, and the principal historical references.

Best Discussion Questions

1. Was Washington correct that a virtuous person could not hesitate, or was hesitation a reasonable response to civil war?
2. At what point did the disagreement with Britain become a conflict among Americans themselves?
3. Did Benjamin Franklin and William Franklin disagree more about liberty, loyalty, public order, or personal duty?
4. Was Joseph Galloway's proposed imperial union a genuine lost opportunity or an unworkable compromise?
5. Does the phrase "rebellion to tyrants" clarify the moral stakes, or does it assume the answer in advance?
6. How does Lord Dunmore's proclamation complicate the familiar idea that Patriots represented freedom?
7. How should we judge people who changed sides, remained neutral, or followed whichever army controlled their community?
8. By the end of these sections, is the Revolution best understood as a war for independence, a civil war, or both?

One-Minute Spoken Summary

SUMMARY Once fighting began at Lexington and Concord, Americans had to choose between competing ideas of duty and legitimate government. Washington joined the Patriot cause, while Congress briefly pursued both war and reconciliation. Independence gave rebellion a new moral language, captured by Franklin's proposed motto about resisting tyrants. Yet Benjamin Franklin's own son William remained loyal to the Crown and was imprisoned. British victories around New York, Loyalist displacement, enslaved people's search for freedom, and divided Indigenous alliances showed that the Revolution involved far more than two armies. Trenton and Princeton preserved the Patriot cause, but the deeper story was an American civil conflict over who deserved loyalty and what freedom required.

Source & Copyright Note

This reading companion is an original interpretive summary and does not reproduce the book's text. Events are grouped thematically; precise section boundaries may vary by edition. Principal references: H. W. Brands, *Our First Civil War*; American Battlefield Trust, Washington's May 1775 letter; Library of Congress, Franklin's proposed national-seal motto and Lord Dunmore's proclamation; National Archives, Declaration of Independence; U.S. Department of State, Continental Congress and Olive Branch Petition; National Park Service, Boston evacuation; New Jersey State Archives, William Franklin; George Washington's Mount Vernon, Long Island and Trenton-Princeton; and Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Haudenosaunee choices.