

The PR campaign that sold America on independence

Rebels built a well-oiled, 18th-century communications machine

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This Fourth of July commemorates the 250th anniversary of American independence, but it also marks the end of the most successful public relations campaign of all time.

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, most Colonists remained neutral or loyal to Britain. The earliest resistance leaders sought to change that.

As Don Draper put it in “Mad Men,” “If you don’t like what is being said, then change the conversation.” That was exactly what they did.

Take the Boston Tea Party and the wider British tea boycott. Many Colonists did not initially resist the Tea Act because, paradoxically, it made their favorite drink cheaper than most competing alternatives, even with a tea tax in place, by reducing distribution costs.

Founding Father Benjamin Rush wrote at the time, “Should it be landed, it is to be feared that it will find its way amongst us. Then farewell American Liberty.”

So, opposition leaders with the Sons of Liberty, a grassroots organization, orchestrated a tea boycott. The public relations theater that the group staged, in which participants disguised themselves and dumped 342 tea chests overboard, aimed to prevent British imports from reaching Colonial storefronts and stomachs.

Despite tea opposition being the minority position at the time, Colonial papers covered the Boston Tea Party heavily. The story practically wrote itself.

A public affairs campaign this effective would cost a Fortune 500 company millions of dollars today. Yet grassroots organizing alone was not enough.

The anti-British forces also mastered the key public relations tactic of coalition-building.

Philosophical idealists worked hand in hand with merchants and tea smugglers, such as John Hancock, one of the wealthiest Colonists, who helped fund their efforts.

Despite their different motivations, together they built a coalition with the financial backing and organizational strength needed to make a measurable impact on public opinion.

To maximize the reach of their message, the rebel cause built an 18th century communications machine.

Through horseback messengers that delivered news updates, pamphlets and editorials, the Committees of Correspondence they created — which effectively functioned as local wire services — pushed their narratives across the Colonies.

Slowly but surely, the rebels transformed a minority cause into a common cause. Distant communities began discussing the same issues in the same way, and unity increasingly took hold.

To highlight just one example, the opposition used its public relations infrastructure to rebrand Parliament's Coercive Acts — laws designed to punish Boston and Boston alone for destroying the tea — as a warning shot to all American settlers.

The Boston Committee of Correspondence argued that punitive measures such as those found within the Coercive Acts could easily spread to other cities and Colonies, declaring that “now therefore is the time when all should be united in opposition to this violation of the liberties of all.”

That “common cause” framing quickly spread far and wide, from Fairfax County to Philadelphia, culminating in 12 of the 13 Colonies sending delegates to the First Continental Congress to coordinate a response.

Then, in 1776, Thomas Paine delivered the knockout punch. “Common Sense,” his 47-page pamphlet that outlined reasons to fight for independence, went viral. Although historians debate the exact number of copies sold, the Smithsonian Institution states that 20% of the Colonial population owned a copy. It served as one of the final catalysts that turned opposition to Britain into the mainstream position. Looking back at how the revolutionary movement's organizers ultimately united the 13 Colonies, John Adams marveled at “the complete accomplishment of it in so short a time and by such simple means ... perhaps a singular example in the history of mankind.” He continued: “Thirteen clocks were made to strike together; a perfection of mechanism which no artist had ever before effected.”

The military victory at Yorktown shocked many, but the most surprising and impressive achievement may have been convincing a majority of the 2.5 million American settlers to embrace a position that many of them initially opposed or ignored.

To again quote Adams, “The Revolution was effected before the war commenced.”

Two hundred and fifty years later, most Americans will mark the day with fireworks and hot dogs. Yet somewhere, I suspect, Don Draper will quietly raise a Canadian Club Old Fashioned to the unmatched persuasion campaign that made it all possible — one whose

lessons in narrative, coalition-building and strategic messaging still shape our world today.

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