

American Independence Overview / Historiography

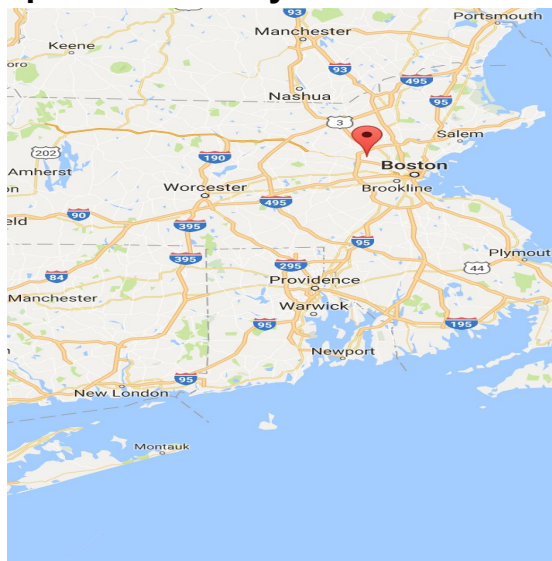
This overview has been compiled by Patrick O'Shaughnessy (@historychappy) & Elliott Watson (@thelibrarian6) using the works below. When quotes are used, they correspond to the relevant colour. The majority of this overview is based on the work by Niall Ferguson.

- Niall Ferguson, *Empire*, 2004.
- Sam Willis, *The Royal Navy's American Disaster*, BBC Magazine.
- Piers Brendon, *The Decline & Fall of the British Empire*, 2007.
- Joseph Ellis, *Revolutionary Summer*, 2013.
- Andrew O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 2013.
- Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, 1998.
- John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 2012.
- Diagrams from Google Maps & National Geographic, American Vision.

American Independence

Causes of War

- 19 April 1775 - Lexington, Massachusetts - Perhaps a Cause & the first Event?! Redcoats & Colonists exchange fire for the first time. Redcoats sent to Concord to collect cache of arms belonging to a colonial militia - but militia were warned by Paul Revere. Redcoats cut the militia down, but are attacked by snipers on the way back to Boston.



- "The British system of empire was notoriously decentralized, strikingly so in the settler colonies. Except in a few 'fortress colonies' such as Gibraltar

or Malta, it depended almost everywhere on the support of local elites, European, Asian and African. This brought a huge saving in the costs of imperialism: it averted the need for an expensive British officialdom except in very small numbers, or for large military forces to impose their diktats. But it came at a price. Devolving so much local power created a political risk and inflicted a burden. (To uphold the status of local elites and the danger that local elites / white settlers would exploit peoples under their thumb). "Coercion and collaboration were thus two sides of the same coin."

- *"The wide degree of self-government that the American colonies enjoyed had encouraged the growth of a 'country party' ideology in which all executive power was viewed with suspicion as corrupt and despotic by nature. The threat of its growth and abuse required aggressive surveillance and a tradition of forceful resistance. As long as London persisted with salutary neglect, this ideology coexisted more or less happily with the theoretical recognition of British Parliament's supremacy, and with pride in the British connection and inheritance. Fear and loathing of France, still entrenched on the continent ... made loyalty natural as well as prudential ... But after 1763 - and the destruction of French power - everything changed."*
- **1763 Proclamation** "The abrupt prohibition on settler expansion beyond the Appalachian mountains in the 1763 Proclamation (meant to forestall further Uprisings like Pontiac's) enraged those for whom it had been the main goal and gain of the (Seven-Years / French and Indian) war.
- **Why revolt?** - *"By 1770s New Englanders were about the wealthiest people in the world ... To say that being a British subject had been good for these people would be an understatement"* Bigger farms, families, better education & paid less tax. Settlers (inc. George Washington) had fought with the British against the French in the Seven Years War.
- *"The Empire carried within it from birth an ideological bacillus that would prove fatal. This was Edmund Burke's paternalistic doctrine that colonial government was a trust. It was to be so exercised for the benefit of subject people that they would eventually attain their birthright - freedom."*
- *"In truth, the ramshackle imperial edifice had never been securely based ... those who ventured abroad were obviously wedded to independence At least as warmly as their kith and kin at home, they cherished the ideal of 'English liberty' They put in place assemblies to rival the British parliament*

and to control Colonial Governors.

- *"It was indeed an axiom of British policy that the majority of Americans were loyal, and that the revolution was nothing more than a coup achieved by 'the intrigues of a few bold and criminal leaders.' "In 1775, MP's ridiculed the idea that the army would encounter significant resistance in America."*
- *"... the real story is one of taxes repealed, not taxes imposed."*



1765 Stamp Act - everything needs to be printed on specially stamped / taxed paper. Grenville resigns in 1766 & by March 1766 the Stamp Act was scrapped. But Parliament emphatically declared that it had full power to legislate over the colonies - *"That was what the colonists disputed."* *"Bad government or no government at all - known as 'salutary neglect - the Americans could endure. But after 1765 the conviction that they had become the victims of tyranny overcame their instinctive feelings of loyalty to the old country and its King ..."* *"The Act became a popular bogey - and proof of the British design to subvert the assemblies and unravel colonial self-government."*

1767 Townshend Act - new custom duties. Tax on tea was actually cut - down from one shilling to threepence per pound. Samuel Adams (Bostonian) calls for resistance. Lord North lifts all duties except the one on tea in January 1770.

Protests go on.

North elected as Prime Minister in 1770 (Key Long Term Factors at play)- *"North inherited a revolutionary situation in America ... In the decade before Lord North became Prime Minister in 1770, six successive governments had introduced a series of colonial policies that precipitated a revolutionary crisis in America."* But nor did the King create the situation (crowned in 1760) ... *"George III did not instigate the colonial policies that triggered the American Revolution. The government ministers, not the king, were the architects of those policies, whose origins predated his reign."* *"North's reservations about the use of force were hardly conducive to making him an effective war leader."* *"North's indecision and his inability to assert himself among Cabinet colleagues were major liabilities in a wartime leader."* *"The consequence of North's leadership was a divided Cabinet that postponed difficult decisions and often left military goals nebulous ... his inability to be decisive or assertive adversely affected the conduct of the war."* *"The Cabinet never resolved military priorities ... The Government relied ... on improvisation and luck ... North's greatest fault was his failure to unite the Cabinet behind an agreed policy"* (due to the political system also - the PM did not have the monopoly on who was appointed to the Cabinet).

1770, March 5 - Boston Massacre - was a street fight that occurred between a "patriot" mob, throwing snowballs, stones, and sticks, and a squad of British soldiers. Several colonists were killed and this led to a campaign by speech-writers to rouse the ire of the citizenry.



1773 - The Tea Act passed by Parliament (Lord North was Prime Minister) on May 10, 1773, granted the British East India Company Tea a monopoly on tea sales in the American colonies. *"For Britain, the right to tax the colonies was fundamental to its authority to govern America. At the same time, taxation united colonial opposition for than any other grievance."* *"Despite his more conciliatory approach, Lord North was ultimately responsible for the policies that precipitated the American Revolution with the East India Tea Act (1773) ...",*



16th December 1773; Boston Tea Party - East India Company tea thrown into Boston harbour.



It should be noted that *‘tea had never been cheaper in New England ... the taxes that caused so much fuss were not just trifling; by 1773 they had all but gone.’*
"Following the Boston Tea Party, there was a national mood of retribution in Britain." *"In Massachusetts the revolt against the british connection was fiercer and the collapse of British authority more complete than anywhere else."*

Navigation Acts - gave British ships a monopoly over trade with the colonies but gave Americans a **“guaranteed market”** for their exports of agricultural staples, cattle, pig iron and ships. Repealed in 1849.

- *“It was the constitutional principle - the right of the British parliament to levy taxes on the American colonists without their consent - that was the bone of contention.”* *"The issue of taxation had immensely symbolic*

importance on both sides of the Atlantic."

- ***"Samuel Adams famous slogan 'No taxation without representation' was not a rejection of Britishness, but rather an emphatic assertion of Britishness. The colonists ... were demanding the same liberty enjoyed by their fellow subjects on the other side of the Atlantic." "The Empire might have worked if the Americans had sent members of Parliament to Westminster."***

American history of self-government "... the colonists regard(ed) their own assemblies as equivalent in status to the Westminster Parliament ... they wanted their assemblies to be put on a par with the Westminster Parliament"

Animosity - Colonists felt not so much 'subjects' of the the British Empire, but 'subjects of subjects'.

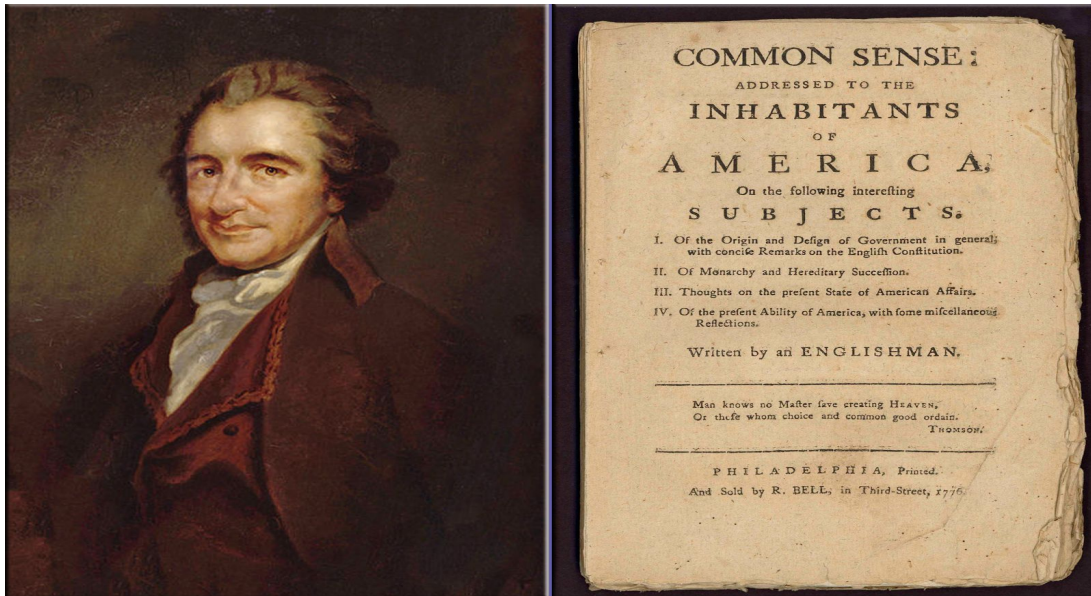
1774 - Coercive Acts - ('Intolerable Acts' to the Patriots) Imposed martial law on Massachusetts. Included the Boston Port Act 1774, which closed the Port of Boston until the destroyed tea (Boston Tea Party) was paid for.

North's "heavy handed" attempt to bring the Massachusetts legislators to heel after the Tea Party - closed port of Boston & imposed military rule - was the *"last of many affronts to colonial legislators."*

"George III strongly endorsed the Coercive Acts, which became the catalyst of the American Revolution." "North acted in the belief that previous concessions had only encouraged greater demands and that anything short of forceful measures would give the impression of a lack of resolution." "North believed that opposition in the colonies was not a popular movement, but rather a conspiracy of a minority who were intent on independence." Passed in Parliament with a huge majority - even the bulk of the opposition supported it. "They (the Acts) sounded a general alarm"

"The issue had become quite simply 'the supremacy of Parliament'. Lord North's government was now caught between two equally assertive legislatures, each convinced it was in the right."

Tom Paine's pamphlet entitled 'Common Sense'

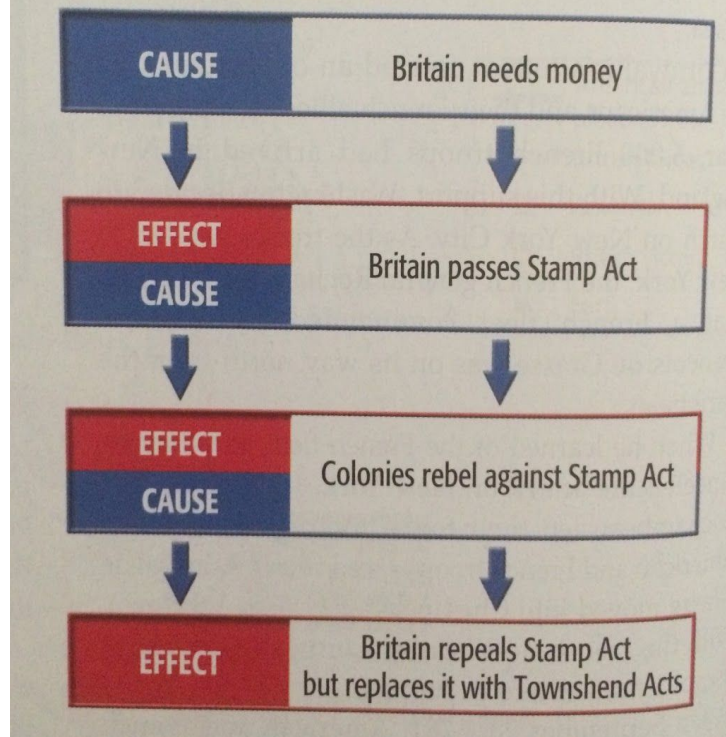


Pub. 1776, dubbed the king 'the Royal Brute of Great Britain'. Paine - gave birth to 'anti-monarchism'. *"The Stamp Act, which Boston greeted with flags flown at half mast and muffled peals of bells, was viewed less as a fiscal imposition than as a measure of oppression. 'No taxation without representation' became the rallying cry of Americans determined to enjoy 'the rights of Englishmen'."* *"The final blow to the prospect of a political accommodation"* Paine was actually an Englishman who had moved to Philadelphia two years previously. *"In the propaganda war, they (Britain) were always on the back foot against the huge flood of print - newspapers, cartoons, handbills and almanacs - that poured from the American presses ... Tom Paine ... sounded the trumpet for an independent republic ..."*

"What perhaps mattered more (than America's developed economy) in the revolutionary prelude was the existence of a wealthy highly educated elite with the intellectual self-confidence to imagine a separate national future."

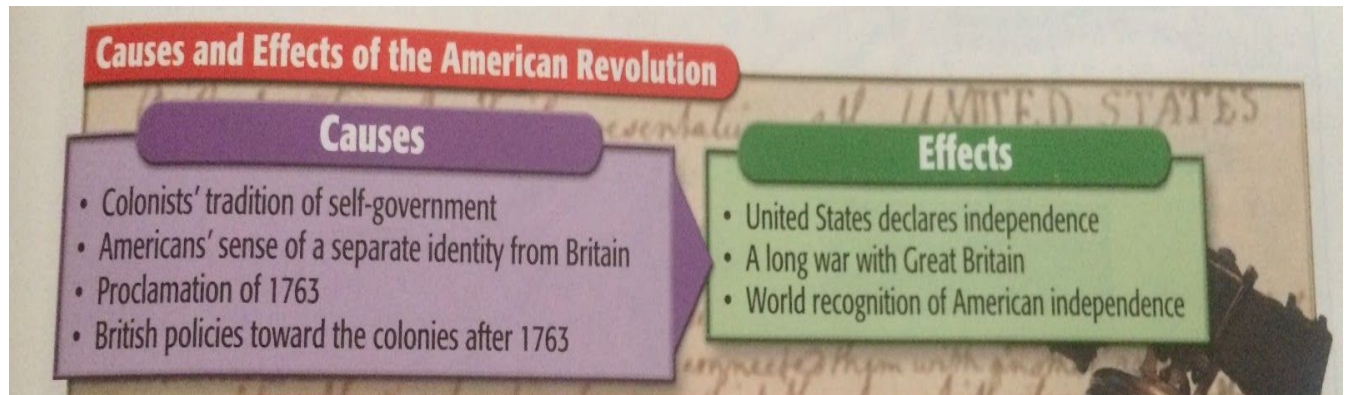
4 July 1776 - Declaration of Independence signed. Signed by all 13 colonies. Civil War *"...divided social classes and even families ... families were split asunder ..."* *"Beyond independence, Americans had no consensus on what being an American meant."*

Cause and Effect



Path to rebellion: *"It was the ... belligerent intentions of George III and the British ministry that wore down old allegiances and made the most decisive difference among ordinary Americans. The recruitment of foreign mercenaries was frequently mentioned as the ultimate stab in the back"*

The War



“Events in this war were not strong and joined to each other by iron links but were flimsy, like a house of cards ... the idea of a chain of events is therefore almost completely unhelpful.”

War involved 22 different navies, thousands of privateers from 10 nations, fought in 5 different oceans, land-locked lakes & rivers; more fleets than any other war in history. Limitations of Naval Warfare: took a month to get a message back to Britain. Limited communication & naval strategy. Weather played a significant role. Fleets would operate differently in different areas and lacked any notion of cooperation. Navies hugely expensive & difficult to maintain. *“Sea power was hardly a surgical instrument of war - more of a heavy blunt club wielded by a blind and drunk weakling.”* Early in the war = British send reinforcements who arrived sick as dogs due to lack of infrastructure at home - British couldn't keep their men healthy. *“The story of the conflict is a story of the struggle for sea power.”* Chance and bad weather could play an equal role to bad planning.

“Maritime war against three European powers after 1778 on top of a settler rebellion imposed an unbearable strain.”

“... for two reasons this was a war Britain simply could not win. For one thing, the transatlantic civil war quickly became absorbed into the long-running global struggle between Britain and France ... This time Britain had no continental allies to tie down France - not to mention her ally Spain - in Europe. Under these circumstances, a full-scale campaign in America would have been hazardous in the extreme ... Just as importantly, many people back home sympathized with the colonists ...”

“The war ... spilled out from the American seaboard and became a global struggle with far more than just the future of the American colonies at stake.”

"... the bottom line was that London could provide neither sufficient troops nor good enough generals to turn localized success into full scale victory."

"In short, London lacked the stomach to impose British rule on white colonists who were determined to resist it." But probably did have the resources & machinery, if it had deployed them! *"Aside from French intervention and incompetent British generalship, at root it was a failure of will in London."*

War Start = America has no navy & no allies. Britain committed half its navy (the largest in the world) to America. 50,000 troops were moved to America & supplied from Britain by sea during the conflict.

British thought that the average American was a British loyalist. They were not; *"Germain's formula for victory was based upon a variety of American intelligence sources which agreed that the colonists' will to fight was fragile and would never survive a major defeat."* *"Latently loyalist"* - This proved false.

- 1) British commander-in-chief William Howe *"ambivalent about waging civil war"*. Like many back home! *"The men who lost America had to contend with a political system in Britain that frustrated the formulation of clear strategic priorities."* After withdrawal from Boston in March 1776, *"The British leadership was thereafter confronted with the task of conquering and occupying America."* *"The (generals were) confronted obstacles of such magnitude as almost to preclude the chances of victory in America. The greatest challenge was the popularity of the revolutionary movement and the difficulty of waging a war of counterinsurgency."*
- 2) Many 'Whigs' backed the colonists, including Charles James Fox. *"In a series of celebrated speeches, Charles James Fox emerged as the nemesis of George III and the war."*
- 3) America *"remained of far less importance"* in economic terms than the Caribbean. Short term costs of re-imposing British authority looked considerably larger than the short-term benefits of doing so. Caribbean was more profitable at the time.
- 4) British won first major engagement at Bunker Hill - but at a major cost - a pyrrhic victory? *"They reclaimed Bunker Hill, overlooking the harbour, but at such a heavy loss as to end any hope of breaking the siege (of Boston)."* British took New York in 1776 & the rebel capital, Philadelphia, in 1777. Continental Army = *"Their compensating asset, intangible but essential, was that they were all volunteers fighting for a cause they believed in passionately."* *"The year 1777 marked the turning point of the war ... The events of the autumn of 1777 confirmed the Declaration of Independence and the survival of the American republic. Germain's grand strategy was in*

ruins and hopes of restoring British sovereignty over all the colonies had been shattered."

- 5) British failure to provide sufficient troops and good enough generals to turn local successes into full victory. VS. *"This motley array (American forces) often proved effective, particularly in guerilla fighting."* *"On other occasions British generals proved dauntlessly incompetent ... By contrast, George Washington, though by no means a military genius, was a great leader ... Formidably self-possessed, ruthlessly single-minded, incomparably tenacious, he made small gains and avoided large losses, staving off defeat until he could achieve victory."* *"He (Howe) had an army of conquest, but insufficient troops for the large-scale occupation necessary for the recovery of America."* *"... the one-man embodiment of 'The Cause' ... If all revolutions require heroes, and they do, the American Revolution had discovered its larger-than-life personality around whom to rally."* *"Howe was also impeded from pursuing a bolder strategy against Washington by the difficulties of obtaining supplies, transport, and food, a logistical problem that vexed him at every term ..."* *"Howe was cautious because he could not afford to sustain heavy casualties in America."*
- 6) British fail to use naval advantage at appropriate times & in appropriate ways. Insufficient ships at start of war - unable to police growth of American sea power or blockade the coast. Chose not to contain Spanish & French fleets in European waters & of maintaining global sea power. *"On numerous occasions the very survival of the British empire hung on a spider's silk."* *"...French military assistance was utterly essential for winning the war for independence."* *"Howe was never able to keep more than about 30 warships blockading the East Coast."*
- 7) British switch operations to South - where there is stronger Loyalist support - but local success at Savannah & Charleston could not prevent overall defeat. Furthermore, *"The British commanders understood that they needed to popular support, but its objective was often in conflict with the use of force and the imperative to win battles ... the very presence of the British army helped to alienate opinion in America."* Use of Hessian mercenaries did not help either.
- 8) Key moment in 1781 - Washington moves south against Cornwallis instead of attacking New York on advice of French commander. French simultaneously defeat British fleet and blockade Chesapeake Bay. Cornwallis was trapped on Yorktown peninsula between James & York rivers. Now British outnumbered 2:1 & outgunned. At the Yorktown battlefield; Cornwallis cannot hold Redoubt 9 & 10. The French attack simultaneously. *"Washington personally ensured that his 'mouse-trap' snapped shut."* *"Cornwallis was an able commander ... but ... he took few initiatives at Yorktown".* *"The Royal Navy was in no state to break the French hold on Chesapeake Bay"* *"The naval situation determined both the*

fate of the thirteen colonies and the shape of the British Empire "Once again, the French contribution was crucial to Patriot success and British defeat. And it was the French navy to his rear that doomed Cornwallis, ruling out the evacuation of his force." "Smelling British blood, Britain's traditional allies, the Dutch, then also turned against them. Weighed down on all sides, the British war effort creaked and groaned until, entirely unexpectedly, by applying exactly the right amount of pressure in exactly the right place at exactly the right time, the Americans and their allies made a break at the Battle of Yorktown, where British hopes of victory were dashed for good." "... the ultimate success of the rebellion depended quite crucially on help from abroad. What destroyed the last British attempt at a compromise settlement in 1778 was the Franco-American treaty and its promise of aid to the embattled revolutionaries. Indeed, from this moment on, the struggle to suppress the American rebellion was overshadowed by the far wider war in defence of Britain's interests in India, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, and by the fear of the invasion of the Home Islands themselves. "

- 9) **Defeat of Cornwallis** "...directly led to the fall of the British government and its replacement with one committed to ending the war. Thus the link between sea power and American independence is traditionally made manifest." "In the aftermath of Yorktown, George III's desire to pursue the war was no longer shared by the majority of the Cabinet.'

The Opposing Sides	
Colonial Advantages	British Advantages
Fighting on home ground	Well-trained, well-supplied army and navy
Good decisions by generals	Wealth of resources
Fighting for their rights and freedoms	Strong central government
French alliance: loans, navy, troops	
Colonial Disadvantages	British Disadvantages
Untrained soldiers; small army	Fighting in unfamiliar, hostile territory
Food and ammunition shortages	Fighting far away from Britain and resources
Weak and divided central government	Troops indifferent; halfhearted support at home

Consequences

- **Approx. 100,000 Loyalists move to Canada & reinforce British rule there - reducing the French Quebecois to a beleaguered minority.**
- **"... The Empire was far from shattered by this loss ... the loss of the**

thirteen colonies seemed to Spur a whole new phase of British colonial expansion ...” “... the British Empire did not disintegrate when the thirteen colonies broke away.” Trade with America actually went up after the revolution.

- *“The Old World did regard the New World’s victory as an ominous inversion of the established order. It was an unbeaten revolt of children against parental authority - the first successful rebellion of colonial subjects against sovereign power in modern history.’*
- *“Yorktown destroyed the North ministry.”*
- *“In short, as Smith further suggested, after the escape of the American tiger Britain was doubtful about breeding colonial cubs which might grow up to be equally savage.’*
- *“... Washington’s victory at Yorktown was a signal calamity for the mother country, foreshadowing future setbacks ... But Britain’s recovery was dramatic and its sustained triumph in the East evidently compensated for the debacle in the West.”*