The great struggle for empire between Great Britain and France created the circumstances within which an independence movement and rising black hopes for freedom developed in America. Starting in 1689 the British and French fought a series of wars in Europe, India, North America, Africa, and the Caribbean Sea. This great conflict climaxed during the French and Indian War that began in North America in 1754, spread in 1756 to Europe, where it was called the Seven Years' War, and from there to other parts of the world.

The war sprang from competing British and French efforts to control the Ohio River valley and its lucrative fur trade. In 1754 and 1755 the French and their Indian allies defeated Virginian and British troops in this region and then attacked the western frontier of the British colonies. Not until 1758 did Britain undertake a vigorous and expensive military effort that by 1763 had forced France to withdraw from North America. Britain took Canada from France and Florida from France’s ally Spain. In compensation, Spain received New Orleans and the huge French province of Louisiana in central North America (see Map 4–1).

These changes had momentous consequences. Deprived of their ability to play off Britain against France and Spain, Indian nations east of the Mississippi River had great difficulty resisting white encroachment. Although the Florida swamps remained a refuge for escaping slaves, fugitives lost their Spanish protectors. Americans no longer had to face French and Spanish threats on their frontiers. The bonds between Britain and the thirteen colonies rapidly weakened.

These last two consequences were closely linked. The colonial assemblies had not always supported the war effort against the French, and American merchants had traded with the enemy. Therefore, after the war ended, British officials decided Americans should be taxed to pay their share of the costs of empire and their commerce should be more closely regulated. In England it seemed entirely reasonable that the government should proceed in this manner, but white Americans had become accustomed to governing themselves, trading with whom they pleased, and paying only local taxes. They were well aware that with the French and Spanish gone, they no longer needed British protection. Therefore, many of them resisted when the British Parliament asserted its power to tax and govern them.
Raising Money for Britain

During the 1760s Parliament repeatedly passed laws that many Americans considered oppressive. The Proclamation Line of 1763 aimed to placate Britain’s Indian allies by forbidding American settlement west of the crest of the Appalachian Mountains. The Sugar Act of 1764 levied import duties designed, for the first time in colonial history, to raise revenue for Britain rather than simply to regulate American trade. In 1765 the Stamp Act, also passed to raise revenue, heavily taxed printed materials, such as deeds, newspapers, and playing cards.

In response, Americans at the Stamp Act Congress held in New York City in October 1765 took their first step toward united resistance. By agreeing not to import British goods, the congress forced Parliament in 1766 to repeal the Stamp Act. But the Sugar Act and Proclamation Line remained in force, and Parliament soon indicated that it remained determined to exercise greater control in America.

In 1767 it forced the New York assembly to provide quarters for British troops and enacted the Townshend Acts, which taxed glass, lead, paint, paper, and tea imported into the colonies from Britain. Resistance to these taxes in Boston led the British government to
station two regiments of troops there in 1768. The volatile situation this created led in 1770 to the Boston Massacre when a small detachment of British troops fired into an angry crowd, killing five Bostonians. Among the dead was a black sailor named Crispus Attucks, who had taken the lead in accosting the soldiers and became a martyr to the Patriot cause.

Crispus Attucks was a fugitive slave who escaped in 1750 at age twenty-seven from Framingham, Massachusetts. Attucks’s father was black, his mother Indian. His master described him as “a mulatto fellow, about 27 years old, named Crispus, 6 feet 2 inches height, short, curl’d hair, his knees nearer together than common.” During his twenty years as a fugitive, Attucks worked as a sailor, with Boston as his homeport.

Attucks shared the anti-British sentiment that developed after the French and Indian War. In Boston British soldiers were the most obvious target of such resentment. Attucks joined a motley crowd that, with clubs and sticks, accosted a small detachment of troops on the chilly evening of March 5, 1770. Attucks was not the only African American in the mob.

Although eyewitness accounts differ, Attucks, who brandished “a large cordwood stick” probably took the lead in confronting Captain Thomas Preston and the nine soldiers under his command. A black witness maintained that Attucks, “a stout man with a long cord wood stick,” hit a soldier. Attucks was almost certainly the first to die when the soldiers, with their backs to a wall, fired into the crowd.

Samuel Adams and other Patriots in Boston declared the forty-seven-year-old Attucks the first martyr to British oppression. They carried his coffin, along with those of three of the other four men who were killed, to Faneuil Hall—called the “Cradle of Liberty.” There Attucks and the other victims of the Boston Massacre lay in state for three days. From this hall ten thousand mourners accompanied four hearses to Boston’s Middle Burying Ground. The inscription on the monument raised to commemorate the martyrs reads:

Long as in freedom’s cause the wise contend,
Dear to your country shall your fame extend;
While to the world the lettered stone shall tell
Where Caldwell, Attucks, Gray, and Maverick fell.

Bostonians celebrated the anniversary of the massacre annually until the 1840s. They revived the practice in 1858 to protest the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* that African Americans were not citizens of the United States. Attucks has remained a symbol of African-American patriotism.
As it turned out, however, Parliament had repealed the Townshend duties, except the one on tea, before the massacre. This parliamentary retreat and a reaction against the bloodshed in Boston reduced tension between the colonies and Britain. A period of calm lasted until May 1773 when Parliament passed the Tea Act.

**Reading Check** What British policies in the 1760s led to rising resentment and resistance in the colonies?

**The Tea Act**

The Tea Act gave the British East India Company a monopoly over all tea sold in the American colonies. A huge but debt-ridden entity, the East India Company governed India for the British Empire. At the time, Americans drank a great deal of tea and Parliament hoped the tea monopoly would save the company from bankruptcy. But American merchants assumed the act was the first step in a plot to bankrupt them. Because it had huge tea reserves, the East India Company could sell its tea much more cheaply than colonial merchants could. Other Americans believed the Tea Act was a trick to get them to pay the tax on tea by lowering its price. They feared that once Americans paid the tax on tea, British leaders would use it as a precedent to raise additional taxes.

To prevent this from happening, in December 1773 Boston’s radical Sons of Liberty dumped a shipload of tea into the harbor. Britain then sent more troops to Boston in early 1774 and punished the city economically. This action sparked resistance throughout the colonies and led eventually to American independence. Patriot leaders organized the Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in September 1774 and demanded the repeal of all "oppressive" legislation. By November, Massachusetts Minutemen—members of an irregular militia—had begun to stockpile arms in the villages surrounding Boston.

In April 1775 Minutemen clashed with British troops at Lexington and Concord near Boston. This was the first battle in what became a war for independence. Shortly thereafter, Congress appointed George Washington commander in chief of the Continental Army. Before he took command, however, the American and British forces at Boston fought a bloody battle at Bunker Hill. After a year during which other armed clashes occurred and the British rejected a compromise, Congress in July 1776 declared the colonies to be independent states, and the war became a revolution.

**Reading Check** What was the main provision of the Tea Act of 1773? Why did some colonists object to it?