

The Coercive Acts

The Coercive Acts were meant to reverse the trend of colonial resistance but actually provoked higher levels of resistance.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the effects of the Coercive Acts on colonial America

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The Coercive Acts describe a series of laws passed by the British Parliament in 1774, relating to Britain's colonies in North America.
- Passed in response to the Boston Tea Party, the Coercive Acts sought to punish Massachusetts as a warning to other colonies.
- The Coercive Acts consisted of the Boston Port Act, the Massachusetts Government Act, the Administration of Justice Act, and the Quartering Act of 1774.
- Tensions escalated over the Coercive Acts and the American Revolutionary War broke out the following year.

Key Terms

- **charter:** A document issued by some authority, creating a public or private institution, and defining its purposes and privileges.

Overview

The Coercive Acts are names used to describe a series of laws relating to Britain's colonies in North America and passed by the British Parliament in 1774. Four of the acts were issued in direct response to the Boston Tea Party of December 1773. By making an example of Massachusetts, the British Parliament hoped these punitive measures would reverse the trend of colonial resistance to parliamentary authority that had begun with the 1765 Stamp Act. Many colonists, however, viewed the acts as an arbitrary violation of their rights. In 1774, they organized the First Continental Congress to coordinate a protest. As tensions escalated, the American Revolutionary War broke out the following year.

Passage of the Coercive Acts

The Boston Port Act

The first of the acts passed in response to the Boston Tea Party was the Boston Port Act. This law closed the port of Boston until the East India Company had been repaid for the destroyed tea and the king was satisfied that order had been restored. Colonists objected that the Port Act punished all of Boston rather than just the individuals who had destroyed the tea. They also contended that they were being punished without having been given an opportunity to testify in their own defense.

The Massachusetts Government Act

The Massachusetts Government Act provoked even more outrage than the Port Act because it unilaterally altered the government of Massachusetts to bring it under control of the British government. Under the terms of the Government Act, almost all positions in the colonial government were to be appointed by the governor or the king. The act also severely limited the activities of town meetings in Massachusetts to one meeting a year, unless the governor called for one. Colonists outside of Massachusetts feared that their governments could now also be changed by the legislative fiat of Parliament.

The Administration of Justice Act

The Administration of Justice Act allowed the governor to move trials of accused royal officials to another colony, or even to Great Britain, if he believed the official could not get a fair trial in Massachusetts. Although the act stipulated that witnesses would be paid for their travel expenses, in practice, few colonists could afford to leave their work and cross the ocean to testify in a trial. George Washington called this the "Murder Act," as he believed that it allowed British officials to harass Americans and then escape justice.

The Quartering Act

The Quartering Act applied to all of the colonies and sought to create a more effective method of housing British troops in America. In a previous act, the colonies had been required to provide housing for soldiers, but colonial legislatures had been uncooperative in doing so. The new Quartering Act allowed a governor to house soldiers in other buildings if suitable quarters were not provided. Although many colonists found the Quartering Act objectionable, it generated the least amount of protest of the Coercive Acts.

Effects of the Coercive Acts

Many colonists saw the Coercive Acts as a violation of their constitutional rights, their natural rights, and their colonial charters. They viewed the acts as a threat to the liberties of all of British America, not just Massachusetts. The citizens of Boston viewed

the Coercive Acts as unnecessary and cruel punishment that inflamed outrage against Britain even further.

Great Britain hoped that the Coercive Acts would isolate radicals in Massachusetts and cause American colonists to concede the authority of Parliament over their elected assemblies. However, the acts unintentionally promoted sympathy for Massachusetts and encouraged colonists from the otherwise diverse colonies to form the First Continental Congress.



“The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draught” (London Magazine, May 1, 1774): The artist of this image targets select members of Parliament as the perpetrators of a devilish scheme to overturn the constitution; this is why Mother Britannia weeps. Note that this cartoon came from a British publication; Great Britain was not united in support of Parliament’s policies toward the American colonies.