

From Resistance to Rebellion

Directions: Long before the Revolutionary War, three significant revolts occurred in the New World. Read the description of each revolt, and then answer the questions that follow.

Bacon's Rebellion

Bacon's Rebellion, in 1676, was the first rebellion in the colonies, and it demonstrated that poor whites and poor blacks could come together against a common enemy. Economic problems led to the revolt. The mercantile system required that colonies trade only with the mother country and increased prices on imported goods. The Navigation Acts forced Virginia to trade tobacco exports only with Great Britain. Barriers to Dutch trade led to three Anglo-Dutch wars and threatened Jamestown with invasion.

Local Indians became the scapegoat for the immediate problems, particularly after Doeg Indians attacked a local farmer for nonpayment. When innocent Indians were attacked in retaliation, large-scale raids and attacks began. Strong supporters of Nathaniel Bacon included escaped slaves, poor landless whites, and indentured servants. Bacon was credited with promoting political reform, including allowing freemen to vote and placing term limits on elected officials. People began to side with Bacon and his cause. Governor William Berkeley pleaded for restraint and compromise. It was his policy to convince the local population that the Indians were peaceful. Trading with the Indians was restricted by Berkeley to his favored friends in the corrupt House of Burgesses. Bacon was one of those left out of this lucrative trade. Bacon was elected to the House of Burgesses. When he went to Jamestown to take his seat, he was arrested by Governor Berkeley.

The planters of Virginia had developed a growing fear of the poor whites and indentured servants who made up the growing underclass. As a result of this fear, many planters began to invest in large numbers of slaves (who would not demand equality and fairness) to work their plantations in the Chesapeake Bay region. The House of Burgesses anticipated war with the local Indians and raised taxes, causing the local population to complain because only one quarter to one half of the planters' income was taxed while everyone else was taxed on full income—and Berkeley's friends were not taxed at all.

Bacon's personal complaint against Berkeley was the governor's denial to him of an officer's commission which would allow him to fight the threatening Indians. Others rallied around Bacon and he issued a "Declaration of the People," which charged Berkeley with playing favorites and alleged that he was corrupt and protected the Indians for his own selfish purposes. Bacon's army occupied Jamestown and burned it to the ground. After Berkeley executed twenty-three rebels, he was recalled to England and replaced.

Leisler's Rebellion

In 1688, James II was deposed in England for his Roman Catholicism. This established the principle that the people could remove an unsuitable king or leader. Various colonial governors were removed for similar reasons, including the governor of New England, Edmund Andros. When Jacob Leisler's forces moved in to replace the new governor, Francis Nicholson, with one of their own, it established the principle of resistance to British rule. The German-born Leisler had assumed control of the provincial government in the wake of the Glorious Revolution when Dutch Protestant prince William and wife Mary replaced the Catholic king. It also established the principle that the colonies were subject to British authority based upon their free will, not nature. Troops sent by the British arrested and executed Leisler after he refused to step aside. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 divided New York City into two different camps. Those supporting Jacob Leisler included the small shopkeepers and tradesmen who made up the merchant or middle class, the poor, most of the militia, the Protestants, and the Dutch. He was opposed by wealthy British merchants, a ruling elite who had a monopoly on power, and aristocratic Hudson Valley families. When Governor Andros was seized and placed under arrest after James II was deposed, the lieutenant governor, Nicholson, took his place. He was suspected of supporting a takeover by the Catholic French. Leisler acted as the executive for one year, collecting taxes and tariffs. Historians have suggested that this was one of the earliest manifestations of self-determination and urban democracy in America.

The Pueblo Revolt

In 1680, an Indian named Popé led a force of twenty-five hundred Indians from two dozen pueblos, against the Spanish, attacking the colonial headquarters in Santa Fe, killing over four hundred soldiers and civilians and two-thirds of the priests, and driving them all the way back to El Paso. He was one of many Pueblo priests publicly whipped for practicing the Indian religions. Spanish Jesuit missionaries imposed the feudal practices of *encomienda* and *repartimiento*. In the *encomienda* system, Pueblo families were required to donate food crops and other resources every year to support the Spanish missions, military forces, and civil institutions. The institution of *repartimiento* forced them to work in Spanish households and fields. This brutal system of exploitation led to revolt. Before the revolt, disease had reduced the local populations by 80 percent and had the effect of weakening the social structure. Pueblo elders lost their authority, and Spanish priests were seen as unable to stop the losses from disease. Sexual abuse of Pueblo women, destruction of kivas and sacramental objects, and punishment for not attending Mass furthered the conditions for revolt. It was a nativistic movement which called for destroying all that the Spanish missionaries had created and a revivalistic movement that demanded that the Pueblo go back to the ways of the ancestors. Resistance to Spanish rule was met with imprisonment, torture, and mutilations. This was the single most successful Indian revolt against a European colonizer/invaser. When the Spanish returned ten years later, they were forced to allow religious tolerance. Kiva and the cross existed side by side. Pueblo land rights were respected.

1. What were the primary causes of each rebellion or revolt?
2. What groups of people were involved in each revolt?
3. What were the obstacles to social, economic, and political mobility in each case?
4. What are the commonalities among the rebellions?
5. What citizens were eligible for participation in government?
6. Was religion in any way involved?