On July 2, 1776, the American colonists voted to separate for good from Great Britain. Two days later, they approved the Declaration of Independence. Thirteen British colonies in North America had declared themselves to be a new nation.

By that day, the American Revolution had actually been underway for some time. Fighting between British soldiers and colonial militias began at Concord and Lexington near Boston, on April 19, 1775. On that day, some colonists clearly favored a final break with Great Britain. Yet, even by July 4, 1776, more than a year later, many colonists still could not accept the idea.

In other words, the American Revolution was not a simple thing. Those who fought the British called themselves “Patriots.” They were, in fact, rebels. By the laws they themselves had accepted, they were outlaws. And not everyone in the colonies agreed with these “outlaws,” not even all those who were angry with Great Britain.

For years, the colonists had protested specific British acts—acts to tax them in certain ways, to limit their settlement of the western lands, and to control their colonial assemblies. Yet until 1776, the colonists protested as British citizens. They directed their anger at Parliament or at King George III. But their loyalty was still to Great Britain. They still felt they were simply defending rights long due to them as members of that nation. Their deepest sense of identity was British.

The American Revolution forced such people to make a painful choice—either hold to their British identity and loyalty or cross the line and join with the rebels. In the end, most colonists did join with the rebels. Yet a large share of them did not. They were “Loyalists,” Americans who remained true to older, more traditional notions of patriotism and loyalty.

This split into “Loyalist” and “Patriot” sides means the American Revolution was also a civil war. That is, it was a war between groups of colonists. It was a war that often divided former friends and close neighbors.

It was a war of ideas as well, for loyalty to Great Britain was not necessarily unthinking loyalty. It was often based on an age-old tradition of beliefs about Parliament, the King, and the rights of all British subjects. At the same time, those who turned against Great Britain also did so in the name of noble ideas, the ideas of liberty and equality described in the Declaration of Independence.

Learning about this great split may lead you to feel more sympathy for those who chose to remain loyal to Great Britain. Some Loyalists did act for personal or selfish reasons. Yet others acted on firm beliefs about their highest duty. They often acted with great courage as well.

Yet studying this split may lead you to realize how big a risk the leaders of the Revolution also took. They had to go against everything they had been taught. And their choice, also, was full of dangers. When they pledged “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” to the Revolution, men like George Washington and John Hancock could easily have lost all three.

The primary sources in this booklet will help you better understand both sides in this civil war and this war of ideas. You will get a better understanding of the Revolution itself. And you will have a chance to debate the meaning of loyalty and patriotism in a time of dramatic and confusing change.
In the spring, England passes the Coercive Acts to punish Boston for the Boston Tea Party. In September, the First Continental Congress meets in Philadelphia to protest the Coercive Acts. A Declaration of Rights claims that the colonists are “entitled to all English liberties.” Colonial militia, called minutemen, begin to organize.

Colonial minutemen fight the British at Lexington and Concord. The Second Continental Congress opens and begins to act as a government. Royal Governor Lord Dunmore in Virginia calls on slaves owned by Patriots (not Loyalists) to join his army. About 300 accept the offer. Overall, a few thousand blacks actually do become Loyalists. About 5,000 also serve in the Continental army fighting the British.

In January, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* is published. It calls on Americans to demand independence. On July 4, Congress adopts the Declaration of Independence. The British fleet and army arrive at New York and will control it and Long Island for the rest of the war. The largest share of Loyalists live there, many arriving from other areas during the war.

Washington clears the British out of most of New Jersey. After the British take Philadelphia, Washington’s forces retreat to Valley Forge, where they spend a terrible winter. In October, however, the Americans win a turning-point victory against the British at Saratoga, New York.

After Saratoga, France and America form an alliance to fight the British. British Loyalists and American Indians massacre American settlers in the Wyoming Valley of northern Pennsylvania and later at Cherry Valley, New York.

Loyalists raid coastal towns in Connecticut, burning Fairfield and Norwalk, and parts of New Haven harbor. In August, American forces defeat the combined Indian and Loyalist forces at Elmira, New York.

The British seize Charleston, South Carolina. In October, British General Cornwallis gives up on his invasion of North Carolina after Americans capture a Loyalist force of 1,000 men aiding him.

Cornwallis surrenders at Yorktown, ending British hopes of winning the war. Fighting on a smaller scale continues. The Articles of Confederation are ratified.

Peace talks take place in Paris. Loyalists begin leaving America, many heading to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Some Loyalist and Indian forces continue to attack settlers in certain frontier regions.

Congress ratifies the Articles of Peace. The war is officially over. About 33,000 Loyalists set sail from New York for England and Canada. In all, a total of about 100,000 Loyalists flee America.