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Brief for
2026 Revolutionary Rhetoric

November 6-8, 2026

This document is the official brief for the 2026 Congress event at Revolutionary Rhetoric. This brief is to help competitors focus their efforts and to suggest material that is appropriate for the themes and purpose of this tournament.

The brief is intended to be a starting point for competitors, not a limitation on them, other than where specifically noted. It provides topics competitors might want to consider, as well as possible source material to begin research. You may choose subject matter beyond the suggestions provided, as long as it remains within the scope of time in Virginia (July 5, 1776–December 31, 1780) that is the focus of this year’s competition.

For several reasons, the organizers have made the decision to prohibit any participant in the Congress event from mentioning enslavement or any other issues addressing racial discrimination or racial prejudice during the event. No bill, resolution, speech, or other action shall mention or address slavery. This will be strictly enforced by tournament directors, the Speaker’s Office, presiding officers, and parliamentarians.

The organizers of Revolutionary Rhetoric are committed to providing participants, judges, coaches, and staff the opportunity to pursue excellence in their endeavors in a safe environment. This opportunity can exist only when each member of our community is assured an atmosphere of mutual respect. The organizers of Revolutionary Rhetoric recognize that, while some historical material may be distasteful or even offensive, its contextual and accurate presentation during the competition is acceptable.¹ That contextual use in competition is wholly different than participation in harassment, hate, and discrimination in a modern-day context—actions which are prohibited. Accordingly, all forms of harassment and discrimination, whether written or oral, based on race, color, religion, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, citizenship, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, or any other characteristic protected by any applicable federal, state, or local law are prohibited, whether committed by participants, tournament staff, judges, coaches, or observers.

Individuals who are found to have violated this policy will be subject to the full range of

¹ However, to emphasize what was already noted, issues, legislation, and debate related to slavery, racial discrimination, and racial prejudice are not acceptable topics for this competition, as noted in the prior paragraph. Racially insensitive language, as was frequently used during this period, is also unacceptable for use in competition (or out of it).

sanctions, up to and including removal from the tournament premises and reporting to senior school administrators.

Resources

Below are some general resources that might be of use to better understand Virginia in the Revolutionary period.

Books

Atkinson, Rick. *The Fate of the Day: The War for America, Fort Ticonderoga to Charleston, 1777–1780*. Henry Holt. 2025.

Broadwater, Jeff. *George Mason: Forgotten Founder*. University of North Carolina Press. 2006.

Calloway, Colin G. *The American Revolution in Indian Country*. Cambridge University Press. 1995.

Chernow, Ron. *Washington: A Life*. Penguin Press. 2010.

Holton, Woody. *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press. 1999.

Holton, Woody. *Liberty Is Sweet: The Hidden History of the American Revolution*. Simon & Schuster. 2021.

Isaac, Rhys. *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation*. Oxford University Press. 2004.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. 1781. (Multiple modern editions available.)

Kranish, Michael. *Flight from Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War*. Oxford University Press. 2010.

Kukla, Jon. *Patrick Henry: Champion of Liberty*. Simon & Schuster. 2017.

McDonnell, Michael A. *The Politics of War: Race, Class, and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press. 2007.

Meacham, Jon. *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*. Random House. 2012.

Middlekauff, Robert. *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789*. Oxford University Press. 2005.

Selby, John E. *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775–1783*. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. 1988.

Taylor, Alan. *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804*. W.W. Norton. 2016.

Wood, Gordon S. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*. University of North Carolina Press. 1998.

Online Primary Sources

The following primary sources are freely available online and are especially useful for developing legislation and speeches grounded in the period.

[Journal of the House of Delegates of Virginia, 1776–1780](#). The official proceedings of the legislative body competitors are simulating in this competition.

[Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789](#). Daily proceedings of the Continental Congress. Volumes IV–XVIII cover 1776–1780.

[Virginia Gazette](#). The official newspaper of Virginia during the period, covering legislation, military affairs, political debate, and daily life. Multiple concurrent editions published in Williamsburg and Richmond.

[Founders Online](#). Free searchable database of over 185,000 documents from Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Adams, Franklin, and Jay, including correspondence, speeches, and memoranda from the period. Jefferson’s papers during his governorship (1779–1781) are particularly relevant.

[Hening’s Statutes at Large](#). The collected laws of Virginia from the colonial period through 1792. Volumes IX–X cover the revolutionary period and contain the actual legislation passed by the House of Delegates during 1776–1780.

[Colonial Williamsburg Digital Collections](#). Digitized Virginia Gazette issues, maps, and other primary sources from the period, hosted by the CW’s John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library

Overview of legislation, committees and parties

Legislation must relate to events, real or imagined,² that would have occurred between July 5, 1776 and December 31, 1780 in Virginia. The only restrictions on subject matter are that legislation proposed must be credible for the period, and no legislation may take up the issue of enslavement, racial discrimination, or racial prejudice. Additionally, no legislation or speech may propose, suggest, or debate the merits of the Declaration of Independence or independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain. For the purposes of this competition, Independence is an established fact for the House of Delegates (no loyalists are left in the body), and legislation must proceed from that premise. That said, bills related to how the former colonies might interact with Great Britain during revolutionary hostilities, what contact might be allowed with Great Britain and her colonies around the world, and similar issues are permitted topics for legislation and debate. Reconciliation with Great Britain is a permitted subject for legislation, though competitors should be aware that both factions are committed to independence and such legislation would face near-universal opposition.

The details for submission and consideration of legislation are laid out in the official event rules. But in short, it will work as follows:

- **Legislation may be submitted to the Speaker's Office beginning September 24, 2026. All legislation is due to the Speaker's Office by October 9, 2026. Only coaches shall submit legislation with student names includes to scott_mckeag@ccpsnet.net.**
- At the close of the bill submission period, the Speaker of the House will review each bill, refer the bill to the appropriate committee of jurisdiction, and place it on that committee's docket for consideration. Referral decisions are not contestable or appealable. While the Speaker will strive to ensure bills are placed in the most appropriate Committee, they may place a bill in a different committee to balance committee workloads.
- During competition, bills will be heard in committee in the order that they were received by the tournament. The earlier you submit legislation, the earlier your bill will be heard in committee.
- As bills are submitted and referred to committee, the online docket for each committee will be updated so competitors will know where their bills will be heard and in what order.
- Remember, the committee your bill is referred to has no connection to which committee or party you are assigned to for the competition. You may need to amend your bill in committee to conform to your assigned party. This is further spelled out in the official rules.

Three committees will be the starting point for legislation in each chamber. The three

² For example, a competitor can propose legislation appropriate to the period even if it is not one that actually came before the House of Delegates. Provided a resolution is plausibly relevant to events or realities of the time period and abides by the subject matter limitations related to enslavement, the legislation will be considered. Should there be any question about plausible relevance of a piece of legislation by a majority of the Committee or by the Committee Chair acting individually, a determination will be made by the Speaker's Office.

committees are:

- **Committee on Confederation and Foreign Affairs (6 members)**
 - This committee deals with Virginia's relations with the Continental Congress, other states (former colonies), foreign powers, and the ongoing war effort. Issues include, but are not limited to, Virginia's obligations under the Articles of Confederation, cooperation with the Continental Army, French alliance matters, trade and diplomacy with foreign nations and their colonies, and inter-state political coordination.
- **Committee on Courts of Justice, Elections, Indian Affairs, Militia and Police (6 members)**
 - This committee deals with the goals and operations of the Virginia militia, the Continental Army's operations within Virginia, the construction of fortifications, any purchase of arms or defensive equipment, as well as defense from piracy, relations with Native American tribes on the frontier, and similar matters. This committee also handles criminal justice issues and legislation related to the judiciary. Finally, any issues related to elections to the House of Delegates or other offices are within the committee's jurisdiction.
- **Committee on Finance, Commerce, Agriculture, and General Laws (8 members)**
 - This committee deals with Virginia's wartime finances, tax bills, and budget issues. It oversees legislation related to managing the economy and non-defense infrastructure of the commonwealth and handles bills related to business, commerce, roads, public hospitals, agricultural policy, price controls, currency, and confiscated Loyalist property. Legislation relating to the operation of government in areas not covered by one of the other two committees is handled here.

The two parties are:

- **Reformers**
 - Reformers believe that independence is the beginning, not the end, of Virginia's political transformation. They push for broader political participation, disestablishment of the Anglican Church, fairer representation for western counties, aggressive war measures, and legal reforms. They see the Revolution as an opportunity to reshape Virginia society along more democratic lines. For the purposes of this competition, Reformers are also more progressive on economic and social issues not directly related to the war. For a Traditionalist to get a Reformer to cross the aisle, they will either have to persuade the Reformer that the bill offers some benefit for the Reformer point of view or amend their bill to gain Reformer support without losing any of their Traditionalist members.
- **Traditionalists**
 - Traditionalists support independence but are wary of the social upheaval that radical reform would bring. They defend the established church, the existing

structure of county-based representation that protects Tidewater planter interests, and a cautious approach to wartime economic policy. They believe Virginia's existing institutions are sound and that the Revolution should change who governs, not how society is organized. For the purposes of this competition, Traditionalists are also more conservative on economic and social issues not directly related to the war. For a Reformer to get a Traditionalist to cross the aisle, they will either have to persuade the Traditionalist that the bill has some benefits for the Traditionalist point of view or amend their bill to gain Traditionalist support without losing any of their Reformer members

Some ideas for legislations

Here are some of the topics and questions for consideration as you write your legislation. **You are not limited to these.** These are simply jumping-off points. Provided the issue, real or imagined, would be salient to Virginia in the period of July 5, 1776–December 31, 1780, you are on the right track.

NOTE: The quotes used include original printing and spelling.

Religious freedom

Should the Anglican Church remain the official religion of the Commonwealth subsidized by taxes, or should all citizens be free to worship--and pay--as they choose?

Since the colonial era, Virginia law required all citizens to pay taxes supporting the Anglican church and its clergy as it was the official church of the Kingdom of Great Britain. These taxes were mandatory whether the taxpayer attended Anglican services or not. Dissenters, a term used at the time for non-Anglican protestant sects like Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists, had seen their numbers in Virginia grow substantially during the Great Awakening and resented funding a church they rejected. Other groups, like Catholics and Jews that were present during the period also opposed paying taxes to support Anglicanism. With independence, the question of having a state church establishment could no longer be deferred. Was state support for religion a pillar of social order, or a tyranny over the mind?

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson introduced a bill drafted to sever the connection between church and state entirely. The bill failed to pass due to old English landowning families, who had long dominated the established church and its social networks, blocked it. However, the debate it ignited would continue for years.

*If their Governors demand a Fee for every Public instrument they sign and they have no Law for such demand, they certainly do wrong, they demand that which the Law does not give them & therefore are guilty of taking from the subjects without legal authority...*³

³ Thomas Jefferson, A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, (1779)

The draft lottery

Should the Virginia compel its citizens to serve through a mandatory draft lottery, or find another way to meet its obligations to the war effort?

By 1777, Virginia's Continental regiments were badly undermanned. Desertion, battlefield casualties, and competition with state militia units had stripped the line. In May 1777, the General Assembly levied county quotas to be filled by draft lottery. Each county's militia rolls were divided into groups of twenty-five, with one man from each group compelled to serve.

The draft was deeply unpopular. Wealthier men hired substitutes, meaning the burden of serving fell on those who could not afford to do the same. Counties that failed to fill their quotas faced penalties, although these were more social than criminal or economic.

The Assembly eventually abandoned conscription in favor of cash bounties. That worked until the money ran out. Through it all, Washington's army remained hungry for Virginians to serve.

*General Washington sent me an Account of the Drafted Soldiers that have joined the Army from this State; & it appears that not one half of the Number voted by the Assembly have got to Camp. Truth obliges me to add that very few more of the Drafts will ever be got into the Service.*⁴

⁴ Patrick Henry, Governor of Virginia, Letter to Henry Laurens, President of Congress, June 18, 1778

The death penalty

Should Virginia abolish capital punishment for most crimes and substitute hard labor, even if the proposed alternatives include punishments that would strike many as barbaric in their own right?

Thomas Jefferson's Bill 64, one of 126 bills submitted to the General Assembly in 1779, proposed a sweeping reform of Virginia's criminal law. Capital punishment would be reserved for treason and murder only. All other felonies, such as robbery, burglary, forgery, would be punished by hard labor on public works. The bill drew on Enlightenment penology, particularly by the Marquis of Gualdrasco and Villareggio, Cesare Beccaria's⁵ argument that severity of punishment does not deter crime; certainty of punishment does.

But the bill also contained provisions that startled even its supporters. For rape, polygamy, and sodomy: castration for men, and for women, cutting a hole through the cartilage of the nose. Deliberate facial maiming would be punished by equivalent maiming of the offender. Horse theft, previously a hanging offense, would be reduced to one to three years of hard labor. The bill failed by a single vote, reportedly because of fury over the horse theft provision. Americans still debate the validity of capital punishment today.

*Whosoever shall be guilty of Rape, Polygamy, or Sodomy with man or woman shall be punished, if a man, by castration, if a woman, by cutting thro' the cartilage of her nose a hole of one half diameter at the least.*⁶⁷

⁵ Never heard of Beccaria? He is certainly not well-known today but was considered a major thinker in the 18th Century. Jefferson had read Beccaria's major work, *On Crime and Punishments*, and quoted Beccaria from it in one of his own books.

⁶ Ouch.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, A Bill for Proportioning Crimes and Punishments in Cases Heretofore Capital (1779)

Paper money problems

With the true buying power of Continental Currency falling, should Virginia accept Continental currency at face value, force creditors to take it by law, or acknowledge reality and refuse it, knowing some might interpret that as Virginia not being all-in on the cause of independence?

The Continental dollar, known as “Continental,” began collapsing almost from the moment it was printed. Congress ultimately ceased printing Continentals in late 1779, but the damage was done. Virginia had paid its soldiers, its suppliers, and its creditors in currency that was becoming worthless by the week. The question before the House of Delegates was fundamental: could a republic force its citizens to accept money that everyone knew was nearly valueless, in the name of the common war effort? Or would doing so simply destroy confidence in the new government itself?

*The depreciation of it is got to so alarming a point — that a waggon load of money will scarcely purchase a waggon load of provision. Is there any thing doing, or that can be done to restore the credit of our currency?*⁸

⁸ George Washington, Letter to John Jay, President of Congress, April 23, 1779

Josiah Philips is a bad man

Should the House of Delegates condemn the Loyalist bandit Josiah Philips to death by name in an act of the legislature and without trial, or does a republic that fought a king for due process have an obligation to try even its worst enemies in a court of law?

Josiah Philips claimed to hold a commission from the deposed royal governor Lord Dunmore and to be acting as a British soldier as he led a gang on various robberies and other crimes around Norfolk and Princess Anne⁹ Counties. Thomas Jefferson described him rather differently: "a mere robber, who availing himself of the troubles of the times, collected a banditti¹⁰, retired to the Dismal Swamp, and from thence sallied forth, plundering and maltreating the neighboring inhabitants."

In May 1778 Jefferson drafted a bill of attainder¹¹ declaring Philips and his confederates guilty and condemning them to death unless they surrendered within a fixed period. It passed in three days. It was the only bill of attainder enacted by Virginia during the Revolution. Philips was eventually captured, tried in ordinary court, and hanged in November 1778.

The constitutional question it raised--can a legislature convict and sentence a man without a trial--would haunt Virginia jurisprudence for years.

Although Philips claimed to be acting under a commission from Dunmore — and thus to be a prisoner of war rather than a common bandit — Thomas Jefferson described him as "a mere robber, who availing himself of the troubles of the times, collected a banditti, retired to the Dismal Swamp, and from thence sallied forth, plundering and maltreating the neighboring inhabitants, and covering himself, without authority, under the name of a British subject."¹²

⁹ Now the City of Virginia Beach.

¹⁰ A banditti is a gang of bandits working in an area with weak law enforcement.

¹¹ An attainder is a legislative act that declares an individual or group guilty without a trial

¹² Papers of James Madison, Vol. 1

Out on bond

Virginia's jails hold Loyalist suspects, deserters, debtors, and common criminals. Should prisoners be released before trial, and, if so, what security should they be required to post? Should everyone be offered bail or just those with certain charges? Or is liberty before judgment a right that belongs to all free persons regardless of the charges against them?

The question of who may be released from custody before trial is as old as English common law and as contested in 1779 Virginia as it is today. Jefferson's Bill 58 proposed a structured framework for bail which would tie it to the severity of the charge, the likelihood of the accused appearing in court, and the financial means of the accused. In wartime Virginia, the stakes for these decisions were high: releasing a Loyalist suspect might mean losing him entirely; holding a man indefinitely without trial violated the republican principles the Revolution had been fought to establish. The Virginia Declaration of Rights already stated that "excessive bail ought not be required." But what was excessive, who was eligible, and who decided? This is an issue American policymakers still wrestle with today.

That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted; that the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended unless when, in cases of invasion or rebellion, the public safety may require.¹³

¹³ Virginia Declaration of Rights, Section 9

Dealing with the French

What obligations do the Treaty of Alliance and the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France create for Virginia? How should the overwhelmingly Protestant Commonwealth respond to the arrival of a Catholic monarchy as its most important military partner?

On February 6, 1778, Benjamin Franklin and the American commissioners signed a Treaty of Alliance and a Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France. Congress ratified both two days after receiving them.

The French alliance with the American side transformed the Revolution. It meant French troops, French warships, French credit, and French diplomatic cover could be brought to bear against the British. It also meant Virginia was now formally bound, through the Continental Congress, to make common cause with the Kingdom of France, an absolute Catholic monarchy, against Great Britain. For Traditionalists who had grown up regarding France as the hereditary enemy of English Protestant civilization, this required a significant mental adjustment. For Reformers who saw the alliance as a lifeline, the question was how Virginia could best fulfill its obligations and cultivate the relationship.

The Virginia General Assembly ratified the alliance at its June 1779 session. But ratification was just the beginning. The alliance created practical obligations around trade, military cooperation, and diplomatic protocol that would occupy Virginia throughout the period.

If War should break out betwan france and Great Britain, during the continuance of the present War betwan the United States and England, his Majesty and the said united States, shall make it a common cause, and aid each other mutually with their good Offices, their Counsels, and their forces, according to the exigence of Conjunctures as becomes good & faithful Allies.¹⁴

¹⁴ Treaty of Alliance Between the United States and France

Moving the capital

Should the seat of government be moved upriver to Richmond, abandoning the colonial capital at Williamsburg for a more defensible but far less developed inland town?

In June 1779, just weeks after Jefferson became governor, a British fleet of thirty ships raided the Virginia coast, burning Suffolk and destroying vast quantities of supplies. Williamsburg, barely forty miles from the Chesapeake Bay, was indefensible against naval assault. On June 18, 1779, the House of Delegates passed an act removing the seat of government to Richmond.

Traditionalists mourned the loss of Williamsburg's cultural and economic prominence.

Richmond had fewer than 700 residents and almost no public infrastructure. Supporters argued that geography was destiny — a republic that lost its capital to a British man-of-war deserved to lose the war.

*It has been also found inconvenient in the course of the present war, where seats of government have been so situated as to be exposed to the insults and injuries of the publick enemy, which dangers may be avoided and equal justice done to all the citizens of this commonwealth by removing the seat of government to the town of Richmond, in the county of Henrico, which is more safe and central than any other town situated on navigable water.*¹⁵

¹⁵ An Act for the Removal of the Seat of Government, June 18, 1779

Gambling

Should the Commonwealth restrict gaming — and can a republic tell its free citizens how to spend their leisure?

Gaming was deeply embedded in Tidewater Virginia's social fabric. The same planters who signed the Declaration of Independence raced horses, played whist for high stakes, and kept billiard tables in their great houses. Jefferson's Bill 88, which was actually passed by the Assembly in October 1779, proposed to restrict gaming by voiding gambling debts and penalizing those who won more than modest sums. The wartime context made the question urgent: soldiers gambling away their pay left families destitute and troops demoralized. But restricting gaming struck at the lifestyle of the Traditionalist gentry who saw such pastimes as marks of their social standing.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly, that no person shall recover in law or equity any sum of money or other thing of value won at any game whatsoever, or by betting on the sides or hands of those who do game.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson. A Bill to Prevent Gaming.

The Spanish question

How should Virginia cultivate Spain as an informal partner — and what are the implications for Virginia's western land claims and the navigation of the Mississippi River?

Spain declared war on Great Britain on June 21, 1779, but did not formally ally with the United States. Spain was simultaneously Virginia's most useful quasi-ally and its most dangerous rival in the west. Governor Patrick Henry had already been writing to the Spanish governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Gálvez, offering to trade "Hemp, Flax, Skins, Furrs, Beef, and Pork" in exchange for military supplies and a loan of 150,000 gold coins. Gálvez had been secretly supplying American forces through New Orleans since 1777.

When Spain formally entered the war in 1779, his campaign up the Mississippi cleared the British from Baton Rouge, Natchez, and Mobile. Virginia desperately needed Spanish goodwill to keep the Mississippi supply route open for George Rogers Clark's frontier operations. But Spain also controlled the mouth of the Mississippi, which was the only outlet for western Virginia's future commerce and had no intention of granting American navigation rights to the river. Should Virginia court a power that held Virginia's western future in its hands?

*I will extend...whatever assistance I can, but it must appear that I am ignorant of it all.*¹⁷

¹⁷ Bernardo de Gálvez, Spanish Governor of Louisiana, to American emissaries.

Hospital funding

Should the House of Delegates fund Virginia's Public Hospital for persons of "Insane and Disordered Minds" adequately, let it close, or allow it to draw supplies directly from the Public Store?

The Public Hospital in Williamsburg, the first public psychiatric institution in America, admitted its first patient on October 12, 1773. However, by 1779, it was going broke. Wartime inflation has driven costs up sixty times, and it was in financial crisis.

Its directors sent a desperate memorial to the House of Delegates reporting that the allowance set at the last session was "far inadequate to the Occasion," and prices had risen "forty, fifty and sixty times" due to wartime inflation and currency collapse. They requested increased funding and the right to draw clothing and necessities directly from the Public Store. The following year the situation had grown so dire they threatened to close entirely. Eventually the hospital did close, forced to suspend operations by post-Revolutionary War inflation and scarcity of provisions.

The reconstructed hospital building stands today on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg at 325 West Francis Street and is open to visitors on Thursdays.

To the Honble The Speaker, & Gentlemen of the House of Delegates. The Memorial of the Court of Directors of the Hospital for the Reception of Ideots, Lunatics, & Persons of insane & disordered Minds, Humbly sheweth, That the Allowance made at the last Session of Assembly for the Support of those unhappy People is far inadequate to the Occasion...the Allowance last made not only is insufficient at present but was greatly so even at the Time it was made, being only four Times as much as was judged proper before the great Rise in the Price of Commodities commenced, which were got up at that Time to forty, fifty, & sixty for one.¹⁸

¹⁸ Directors for the Hospital for the Reception of Ideots, Lunatics and Persons of Insane and Disordered Minds, Memorial to the House of Delegates.