

The Enlightenment and Revolutions 1550-1800

THE STORY MATTERS...

The Scientific Revolution led to the Enlightenment, a major European intellectual movement that applied reason to all human experience. The English mathematician Sir Isaac Newton was a key figure in the Scientific Revolution. His fundamental scientific insight, that the physical world operated according to natural laws discovered through scientific investigation, influenced every area of Enlightenment thought.

Lesson 21-4

The American Revolution

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

amendment guarantee

Content Vocabulary

popular sovereignty federal system

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why do new ideas often spark change?
- How do new ways of thinking affect the way people respond to their surroundings?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The ideas of the Enlightenment clearly made an impact on the colonies in North America. In response to unfair taxation and other issues, the colonists revolted against British rule, formed their own army, and declared their independence. Many Europeans saw the American Revolution as the embodiment of the Enlightenment's political dreams.

Britain and the American Revolution

GUIDING QUESTION *What were the causes of and influences on the American Revolution?*

In 1688 the Glorious Revolution resulted in a Bill of Rights that affirmed Parliament's right to make laws. As a result, the monarch and Parliament shared power. The monarch chose ministers, who were responsible to the Crown. These ministers set policy and guided Parliament. Parliament's power to make laws, levy taxes, and pass the budget indirectly influenced the monarch's ministers. The United Kingdom of Great Britain came into existence in 1707, when the governments of England and Scotland were united. The term British came to refer to both the English and the Scots.

In 1714 a new dynasty was established when the last Stuart ruler, Queen Anne, died without an heir. The crown was offered to her nearest relatives, Protestant rulers of the German state of Hanover. The first Hanoverian king, George I, did not speak English. Neither the first nor the second George knew the British system well, so their chief ministers were allowed to deal with Parliament.

In the meantime, growing trade and industry led to an ever-increasing middle class that favored the expansion of

trade and of Britain's world empire. They found a spokesman in William Pitt the Elder, who became head of cabinet in 1757. He expanded the British Empire by acquiring Canada and India in the Seven Years' War.

In North America, then, Britain controlled Canada as well as the thirteen colonies on the eastern coast of what is now the United States. The British colonies were well populated, containing more than 1 million people by 1750. They were also prosperous.

In theory, the British Board of Trade, the Royal Council, and Parliament controlled the colonies. In actuality, the colonies had legislatures that often acted independently. Merchants in port cities such as Charleston, New York, and Boston did not want the British government to run their affairs.

The American Revolution Begins

After the Seven Years' War, British leaders wanted to get new colonial revenues from the colonies. These revenues would then be used to cover war costs. These would also pay for the expenses of maintaining an army to defend the colonies.

In 1765 Parliament imposed the Stamp Act on the colonies. The act required certain printed materials, such as legal documents and newspapers, to carry a stamp showing that a tax had been paid to Britain. Opposition was widespread and often violent. The act was repealed in 1766, ending the immediate crisis, but the cause of the dispute was not resolved.

Crisis followed crisis in the 1770s. To counteract British actions, the colonies organized the First Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in September 1774. Members urged colonists to take up arms and organize militias.

Fighting finally erupted between colonists and the British army in April 1775 in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. Meeting soon afterward, the Second Continental Congress set up an army, called the Continental Army. George Washington served as its commander in chief.

Common Sense

Though the revolution had begun, the colonies had yet to declare their independence. Many patriots believed most

colonists were still loyal to the king. However, in January 1776 public opinion began to change when Thomas Paine published a persuasive pamphlet called *Common Sense*. Born in England, Paine strongly believed in the rights of people to govern their own affairs and separate from the rule of a monarch. In *Common Sense*, Paine argued that monarchies had been set up by seizing power from the people. King George III was a tyrant, he argued, and it was time for the colonists to declare independence. Within three months, *Common Sense* had sold 100,000 copies. George Washington noted that “Common Sense is working a powerful change in the minds of men.” One by one, the provincial congresses and legislatures told their representatives at the Continental Congress to vote for independence. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson. With this stirring political document, the American Revolution had formally begun.

The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence contains important legal and political ideas. It states that “... all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” In simple terms, this forms a legal foundation for the principles of equality before the law and individual rights. The impact of these legal ideas is immense. Unlike later governing documents of the United States, the Declaration of Independence includes broad statements supporting equality and human rights. Today, the Declaration of Independence continues to influence human and property rights movements all over the world.

In its opening line, the Declaration of Independence spelled out that the United States was a new nation, ready to interact with other nations on an equal footing. Politically, the writers of the Declaration of Independence were asserting that a government existed only because of popular sovereignty – or the right to govern through the consent of the people. Additionally, the Declaration firmly states that a government that fails to uphold the ideals of liberty could be justifiably overthrown by the people. These political ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence inspired revolutionaries in Latin America, France, and other parts of Europe just decades after the American Revolution. Today they continue to influence revolutionaries and political reformers across the globe.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, was an American revolutionary, Founding Father, and politician. He was heavily influenced by Enlightenment thinkers John Locke, Francis Bacon, and Isaac Newton. As a supporter of the Enlightenment, Jefferson distrusted a strong central government, favoring republicanism and having a strong belief in religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Jefferson authored the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1777, which the Virginia legislature adopted as law in 1786. Jefferson’s

republican political principles and his views on religious freedom would profoundly influence the formation of the U.S. Constitution in 1787.

As a Founding Father of the United States, Jefferson’s popularity carried him from governor of Virginia to secretary of state, vice president, and eventually the third president of the United States (1801-1809). Although a strong presidential figure instrumental in doubling the size of the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Jefferson also set a standard of presidency that emphasized a weak executive power. Thomas Jefferson’s political writings continue to influence American politics today.

Analyzing PRIMARY SOURCES

Declaration of Independence

“We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”

– from the *Declaration of Independence*

PARAPHRASING

Rewrite the excerpt from the *Declaration of Independence* in your own words.

British Defeat

Support from foreign countries was important to the colonies’ cause. These nations were eager to gain revenge for earlier defeats at the hands of the British. The French supplied arms and money to the rebels. French officers and soldiers also served in Washington’s army. In February 1778, following a British defeat, the French granted diplomatic recognition to the new United States. When Spain and the Dutch Republic entered the war, the British faced war with the Europeans as well as the Americans.

When General Cornwallis was forced to surrender to the American and French forces under Washington at Yorktown in 1781, the British decided to end the war. In 1783 the Treaty of Paris recognized the independence of the American colonies. The treaty also granted the Americans control of the western territory from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Comparing Describe two similarities between the reigns of Explaining Why did some American colonists seek independence from Great Britain?

The Birth of a New Nation

GUIDING QUESTIONS *What were the effects of the American Revolution? Why did intellectuals believe the formation of the United States carried out Enlightenment thought?*

After overthrowing British rule, the former colonies feared the power of a strong central government. The states' first constitution, the Articles of Confederation (1781), created a weak central government that lacked the power to deal with the nation's problems. In 1787 delegates met in Philadelphia at the Constitutional Convention to revise the Articles of Confederation. The delegates decided to plan for an entirely new government.

The Constitution

The proposed Constitution created a **federal system** in which the national government and the state governments shared power. Based on Montesquieu's ideas, the national, or federal, government was separated into three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch had power to check, or restrain, acts of the other branches.

A president served as the head of the executive branch, which is why it may be referred to as a presidential democracy. The legislative branch consisted of elected representatives in two houses – the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Supreme Court and other courts formed the judicial branch. After ratification by 9 of the 13 states, the Constitution took effect.

Although many individuals contributed to the framing of the U.S. Constitution, the master builder was James Madison. He believed that power should be divided among the national government, state governments, and the people. This idea of a “division of powers” contributed greatly to the federal system currently in operation in the United States today, and in other federal systems of government throughout the world.

The Bill of Rights

As promised during negotiations over ratification, the new Congress proposed 12 amendments to the Constitution. The states approved 10 of the amendments. Together, these amendments became known as the Bill of Rights. As we have seen, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England had also resulted in a Bill of Rights.

These 10 amendments guaranteed freedom of religion, speech, press, petition, and assembly. They gave Americans the right to bear arms and to be protected against unreasonable searches and arrests. They guaranteed trial by jury, due process of law, and the protection of property rights.

Many of the rights in the Bill of Rights were derived from the natural rights proposed by the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and John Locke. European intellectuals saw the American Revolution as the confirmation of the premises of the Enlightenment. A new age and a better world could be achieved.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing What was the purpose of separating the federal government into three separate branches?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

popular sovereignty the right to govern through the consent of the people

federal system a form of government in which power is shared between the national and state governments