

Topic 3.6

The Influence of Revolutionary Ideals

How is the one exalted, and the other depressed, by the contrary modes of education which are adopted! The one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. . . . The sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science.

Judith Sargent Murray, "On the Equality of the Sexes" (1779)

Learning Objective 1: Explain the various ways the American Revolution affected society.

Learning Objective 2: Describe the global impact of the American Revolution.

Revolutionary ideas impacted American society before, during, and after the war that brought the colonies freedom from British control. These ideas shaped the new state governments that replaced the colonial ones (see Topic 3.7), and they had particular significance for women, enslaved workers, and Native Americans.

Women in the Revolutionary Era

Both prior to and during the war, groups of women such as the **Daughters of Liberty** organized to oppose British actions. Before the war, they took direct action by boycotting British goods. During the war, they provided supplies to the fighting forces. Some women followed men into the armed camps and worked as cooks and nurses. In a few instances, women fought in battle, either taking their husband's place, as **Mary McCauley** (also known as **Molly Pitcher**) did at the Battle of Monmouth, or passing as a man and serving as a soldier, as **Deborah Sampson** did for a year. Similarly, female Loyalists also provided support to colonial and British troops.

Economic Role The most important contribution of women during the war was maintaining the colonial economy. While fathers, husbands, and sons were away fighting, women ran family farms and businesses. They provided much of the food and clothing necessary for the war effort.

Political Demands The combination of hearing the revolutionary rhetoric and being actively engaged in the struggle influenced how many women viewed their role in society. A new view of their status in society evolved, a change referred to as **Republican Motherhood**. This new role called for educating women so that in the home they could teach their children the values of the new republic and their roles as citizens. This gave women a more active role in shaping the new nation's political life. However, it was still a role carried out in the home, not in public, and it did not imply equality with men. Few people, male or female, advocated full equality.

Despite their contributions, women continued in their second-class status. Unsuccessful were pleas such as those of **Abigail Adams** to her husband, John Adams: "I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors."

The Status of Enslaved African Americans

The institution of slavery contradicted the spirit of the Revolution and the idea that "all men are created equal." For a time, the leaders of the Revolution recognized this and took some corrective steps. The Continental Congress abolished the importation of enslaved people, and most states went along with the prohibition. Several northern states ended slavery, while in the south, some owners voluntarily freed their enslaved laborers. Slavery was in decline. Many leaders, including slave owners such as James Madison, wanted it to end. However, he could not envision a society in which White and free Black people lived together. So, he hoped that freed people would simply return to Africa.

However, this changed dramatically with the development of the cotton gin in 1793 (Topic 3.12). By making cotton production more efficient, it quickly increased the demand for low-cost labor. Slave owners came to believe that enslaved labor was essential to their prosperity and that the ideals of the Revolution did not apply to the people they owned. By the 1830s, they developed a rationale for slavery that found religious and political justification for continuing to hold human beings in lifelong bondage.

Native Americans and Independence

American Indians generally supported the British in the Revolutionary War, so they did not benefit from the success of the colonies' independence. Further, colonists' racism and greed for land caused most of them to view American Indians as obstacles to settlement that should be removed. Very few colonists believed that the ideas of liberty and equality applied to American Indians.

International Impact of the American Revolution

Just as the American Revolution was shaped by ideas imported by the European Enlightenment, so it influenced events elsewhere. The ideas that people have a right to govern themselves, that all people are created equal, and that individuals have inalienable rights have had wide appeal. Leaders of the French

Revolution (1789–1799) that overthrew the monarchy, the United Irishmen who rebelled against British rule (1798), the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) that ended slavery, and numerous Latin American revolutions against European control in the 19th century all cited the Declaration of Independence as inspiration. In the 20th century, the impact of these ideas appeared in countries as diverse as Zimbabwe in central Africa and Vietnam in southeast Asia.



One of the leaders inspired by the American Revolution was Toussaint Louverture of Haiti. He led the largest successful revolution by enslaved people in history.

Source: Engraving (1802). John Carter Brown Library, Wikipedia.org



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: HOW UNUSUAL WAS THE REVOLUTION?

Was the American Revolution similar to or different from other revolutions in history. Historians have provided different answers to this question.

Similarities with Other Revolutions In *Anatomy of a Revolution* (1965), historian Crane Brinton was struck by how alike the American Revolution, the French Revolution (1789–1794), and the Russian Revolution (1917–1922) were. According to Brinton, each one passed through similar stages and became increasingly radical.

Other historians have noted similarities between the American Revolution and the colonial rebellions in Africa and Asia after World War II. All were against distant European imperial powers. Many featured guerrilla forces (the colonies in the 1770s, Cuba in the 1950s, and Vietnam in the 1960s) and were weaker in the cities but stronger in the surrounding rural territories.

Differences with Europe Other historians have focused on the differences between American and European revolutions. For example, the French and Russians reacted to feudalism and aristocratic privilege that did not exist in the American colonies. In their view, Americans did not revolt against outmoded institutions but merely carried to maturity a liberal, republican movement that had been gaining force for years.

Impact Historians also disagree on whether the American Revolution shaped later revolutions. Using the insights from comparisons has helped historians better understand the American Revolution in its historical context.

Support an Argument: Explain two perspectives on the radical nature of the American Revolution.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain different ways that the American Revolution affected society and the world.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

A New Nation (SOC)

Mary McCauley (Molly Pitcher)

Deborah Sampson

Republican Motherhood
Abigail Adams

Separation (NAT)

Daughters of Liberty

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–3 refer to the following excerpt.

“A Declaration of Rights made by the representatives of the good people of Virginia . . .

Section 1. That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights. . . .

Section 2. That all power is vested in and consequently derived from the people. . . .

Section 4. That no man, or set of men, is entitled to exclusive or separate . . . privileges from the community. . . .

Section 5. That the legislative and executive powers of the state should be separate and distinct from the judiciary. . . .

Section 6. That elections of members . . . as representatives of the people, in assembly, ought to be free; and that all men, having sufficient evidence of permanent common interest with and attachment to the community, have the right of suffrage. . . .

Section 12. That freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty. . . .

Section 16. All men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion.”

Virginia Declaration of Rights, 1776

1. Which of the following sections was the most direct reason for conflicts between Virginia and the British government?
 - (A) Section 1: all people are by nature equal
 - (B) Section 2: legitimate government power comes from the people
 - (C) Section 4: no person deserves special privileges
 - (D) Section 16: people should be able to worship freely
2. Which of the following sections most clearly reflected a belief in the social contract theory of government?
 - (A) Section 2: origins of governmental power
 - (B) Section 5: separation of government powers
 - (C) Section 6: right to vote
 - (D) Section 12: freedom of the press
3. The group most likely to oppose the ideas expressed in this excerpt would have been
 - (A) the Minutemen of Lexington, because they were from New England
 - (B) the Daughters of Liberty, because they were women
 - (C) Tories such as William Franklin, because they supported the British
 - (D) African Americans, because most of them were enslaved

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

Use complete sentences; an outline or bulleted list alone is not acceptable.

1. “In the decades following the Revolution, American society was transformed. . . . The Revolution resembled the breaking of a dam, releasing thousands upon thousands of pent-up pressures. . . . It was as if the whole traditional structure, enfeebled and brittle to begin with, broke apart, and the people and their energies were set loose in an unprecedented outburst. “Nothing contributed more to this explosion of energy than did the idea of equality. Equality was in fact the most radical and most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution. Its appeal was far more potent than any of the revolutionaries realized. Once invoked, the idea of equality could not be stopped, and it tore through American society and culture with awesome power. . . . Within decades following the Declaration of Independence, the United States became the most egalitarian nation in the history of the world, and it remains so today, regardless of its great disparities of wealth.”

Gordon S. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 1993

“Today, ‘equality’ is generally interpreted to include protection for the rights of minorities; during the Revolution, ‘the body of the people’ referred exclusively to the majority. . . .

It is one of the supreme ironies of the American revolution that the assumption of authority by “the body of the people”—probably its most radical feature—served to oppress as well as to liberate. This was a real revolution: the people did seize power, but they exercised that power at the expense of others—loyalists, pacifists, merchants, Indians, slaves—who, although certainly people, were not perceived to be part of the whole. This was, after all, a war. It would not be the last time Americans sacrificed notions of liberty and equality in the name of the general good.

Our Revolutionary heritage works both ways. ‘The body of the people,’ the dominant force during the 1770s, has empowered and deprived.”

Ray Raphael, *A People’s History of the American Revolution*, 2001

Using the excerpts, answer (a), (b), and (c).

- (a) Briefly explain ONE major difference between Wood’s and Raphael’s historical interpretations of how radical the American Revolution was.
- (b) Briefly explain how ONE historical event or development in the period 1774 to 1787 that is not explicitly mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Wood’s interpretation.
- (c) Briefly explain how ONE historical event or development in the period 1774 to 1787 that is not explicitly mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Raphael’s interpretation.