

3. From Ideas to Independence: The American Revolution

The colonists gathered ideas about government from many sources and traditions. But these ideas did not all come from the study of ancient history or European philosophy. They were also shaped by the colonists' everyday experiences of life in colonial America.



Colonial Experience with Self-Government

Most of the 13 colonies were established under royal charters issued by the king. These charters gave ultimate power to the king and his appointed officials. But because the colonies were so far from Britain, the charters left a significant amount of local control in the hands of the colonists themselves.

In several colonies, the settlers modified their royal charters or added other agreements. One example of an early agreement was the Mayflower Compact. This historic document was named after the *Mayflower*, the small ship that brought English colonists to Massachusetts in 1620.

Before the settlers landed, they drew up a **compact**, or agreement, for the governing of the new colony. In this compact, they agreed to live in a “Civil Body Politic.” They also agreed to obey “just and equal Laws” enacted by representatives of their choosing “for the general good of the Colony.” This was the first written framework for self-government in the American colonies.

New England colonists soon developed their own form of local government, a version of direct democracy known as the town meeting. At these meetings, residents could discuss issues and make decisions that affected their community.

Later, in 1641, colonists in Massachusetts created New England's first code of laws, called the Massachusetts Body of Liberties. Following in the tradition of English government, this code guaranteed certain basic rights to the colonists.

By the early 1700s, most colonies had developed a governing structure of executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The executive was a governor, usually appointed by the king. Royal governors had substantial power, although that power could be partly limited by colonial legislatures.

The legislatures typically consisted of two houses. The upper house was a council appointed by the governor. The lower house was an elected assembly with members chosen by voters in the colony.

The first elected assembly in the colonies was Virginia's House of Burgesses, established in 1619. Later, the other colonies formed elected assemblies. Like Parliament, these assemblies held the “power of the purse”—the power to approve new taxes or spending—which meant they could exercise some control over the governor.

The colonial assemblies were hardly models of democracy, because in most cases only white, male landowners were allowed to vote. Nevertheless, the assemblies reflected a belief in self-government. They also affirmed the principle that the colonists could not be taxed except by their elected representatives. Over time, the assemblies would play an increasingly important role in colonial government.

The Route to Rebellion

A series of actions and events starting in the 1760s set the American colonies on a course toward armed revolution and independence.

1760

1765

1767

1770

1775

1780

1765 Stamp Act
A tax levied by Parliament on all paper goods in the colonies raises cries of "no taxation without representation."

1767 Townshend Acts
These acts place duties on goods imported into the colonies. The colonists resist by boycotting all British goods.

1770 Boston Massacre
Protesters in Boston provoke British soldiers, causing them to fire into the crowd, killing five people. Paul Revere's famous engraving of the event helps spark further protests.

1773-1774 Boston Tea Party and the Intolerable Acts
Colonists protesting the Tea Act dump taxed tea into Boston Harbor. Britain responds by imposing the Intolerable Acts on the colonies. George Washington calls the acts "repugnant to every principle of natural justice."

1775 Fighting begins
Militia troops skirmish with British soldiers at Lexington and Concord, beginning the American Revolution.

1776 Declaration of Independence
The Continental Congress adopts a resolution declaring the colonies to be "Free and Independent States."

From "Benign Neglect" to Armed Rebellion

By the mid-1700s, the colonies were accustomed to managing their own affairs. Although Britain provided defense and a market for products grown or produced in the colonies, it rarely interfered with the day-to-day business of government.

In the 1760s, however, Britain reversed this policy of "benign neglect" by enforcing taxes and restrictions on the colonies. This change came about after the French and Indian War, a war fought against France and its Indian allies on North American soil.

Britain won the French and Indian War in 1763. As a result, it gained control of Canada and the Ohio Valley, areas formerly claimed by France. To defend that territory, Britain had to station more troops in the colonies. The British government argued that the colonies should pay some of the cost of this added defense. To achieve that end, Parliament enacted the Stamp Act in 1765, which said Americans must buy stamps to place on their deeds, mortgages, liquor licenses, playing cards, almanacs, and newspapers.

The colonists were outraged. In their eyes, the stamps were a form of taxation. As British citizens, only their elected representatives could tax them. Therefore, because the colonies had no representation in Parliament, the taxes were illegal.

Raising the cry of "no taxation without representation," the colonists united in protest against the Stamp Act. In response, the British government repealed the hated act. But it continued trying to control the colonies through taxes and other measures. Protests continued and violence flared. On March 5, 1770, British troops shot and killed five agitators in Boston, an incident known as the Boston Massacre.

In 1773, Parliament tried again to force the colonies to accept its authority, this time by placing a tax on imported tea. Late that year, three ships arrived in Boston Harbor with the first load of taxed tea. Colonists dressed as Indians emptied 342 chests of tea into the harbor in defiance of British authority.

In a belated effort to crack down on such protests, Parliament imposed sanctions known in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts. These harsh penalties further inflamed colonial resistance to British rule. Hoping to defuse the escalating conflict, colonial leaders gathered in Philadelphia in 1774. This assembly, called the First Continental Congress, called for peaceful opposition to British policies.

By this time, however, colonial patriots were already forming **militias**, or groups of armed citizens, to defend their rights. On April 19, 1775, militia troops from Massachusetts clashed with British soldiers in battles at Lexington and Concord. These skirmishes marked the beginning of the American Revolution.



The Decision to Declare Independence

Shortly after fighting broke out in Massachusetts, the Continental Congress met again. The delegates quickly voted to form a Continental Army made up of volunteers from all the colonies. They chose George Washington, a leading officer in the Virginia militia, to be the new army's commanding officer.

Still, the Congress hesitated to call for a final break with Britain. Many delegates hoped instead that a peaceful resolution could be found. John Adams of Massachusetts, however, was not among them. Over the next year, Adams worked tirelessly to convince his fellow delegates that independence should be their goal.

Finally, in June 1776, the Congress formed a committee to draft a declaration of independence. This committee consisted of five men: Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert R. Livingston of New York. The task of crafting the first draft went to Jefferson. A gifted writer steeped in Enlightenment ideas, Jefferson wrote,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

—Declaration of Independence, 1776

In these two sentences, Jefferson set forth a vision of a new kind of nation. Unlike old nations based on blood ties or conquest, this new nation was born of two key ideas. The first is that governments are formed to protect people's **unalienable rights**. In a slight twist on Locke, Jefferson defined those basic individual rights as the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The second key idea is that governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

The Declaration goes on to say that if a government fails to protect people's rights, the people should abolish it and form a new one. To bolster the case for doing just that, the Declaration details “a long train of abuses” that violated the colonists' rights. The document concludes with the bold declaration that



These United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; . . . they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and . . . all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved . . . And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

—Declaration of Independence, 1776

On July 4, 1776, the members of Congress formally approved the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was later written on parchment for delegates to sign. By signing the Declaration, the delegates were making a formal declaration of war against what was then the most powerful nation on Earth.

Creating a New Government During Wartime

The fighting with Great Britain dragged on for five more years, finally ending in 1781 with the surrender of the British army at Yorktown, Virginia. During this time, the Continental Congress served as the new nation's government. It raised troops and supplies for the war effort, borrowed large sums of money, and negotiated treaties with foreign countries. Most of this was done without the backing of a constitution, but not for lack of trying on the part of Congress.

After declaring independence, Congress appointed a committee to prepare a plan of government known as the Articles of Confederation. This plan was approved by Congress in 1777 and sent to the states for **ratification**, or formal approval. The states did not get around to approving the Articles until 1781, just months before the fighting ended.

With or without a constitution, Congress had a hard time managing the war effort. It depended on the states for funding and was often short of money. As a result, it had difficulty supplying the troops with arms and provisions. Many soldiers had to fight without adequate weapons, uniforms, or food to sustain them.

By the war's end, many Americans were skeptical of Congress's ability to govern the new nation. Some believed that the country needed a strong ruler to ensure stability. The obvious choice was George Washington, commander of the army and hero of the revolution.

In 1782, an army officer who longed for such a strong ruler wrote a letter to Washington. In it, he expressed his hope, shared by many of his fellow officers, that the independent American states would be joined into "a kingdom with Washington as the head." The general was appalled. He had fought for too long to sever ties with a monarchy to aspire to becoming a new king. He responded to his admirer,

Be assured Sir, no occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army . . . banish these thoughts from your mind.

—George Washington, 1782

Although Washington rejected the idea of an American monarchy, this incident hinted at some of the difficulties facing the new American government.