

UNIT 3 — Period 3: 1754–1800

Topic 3.1

Contextualizing Period 3

Learning Objective: Explain the context in which America gained independence and developed a sense of national identity.

In the 150 years after 1607, the 13 British colonies in North America began to develop an identity distinct from Great Britain. In the following 50 years, these colonies helped fight a war against France, won their own independence, wrote a constitution, and established a democratic republic. The transformation from colonies to a new country resulted from a change in how the British ruled their colonies, the impact of European affairs and ideas on the colonists, and the development of American leaders and people who wanted self-government.

British-French Wars During the colonial period, the British and the French fought a series of wars for control of territory in Europe, the Americas, and South Asia. The last of these, the Seven Years' War, began in North America in 1756. Because American Indians were heavily involved in defending their interests, and most allied with the French, this event is also known as the French and Indian War. The British victory in 1763 consolidated their control of North America and freed colonists from fear of French attacks. In addition, the contributions by the colonies reflected their political maturity. They became more confident of their ability to stand up for their interests.

Colonial Independence To pay for the war, the British tried to collect more taxes from the colonies they were protecting. In contrast, many American colonists saw themselves as self-sufficient and were emboldened by “enlightened” thinking to call for greater self-governance. These clashing views caused the colonies to found a new nation.

The Articles of Confederation and the Constitution Inspired by the republican ideals of the American Revolution, the new country was initially governed by the Articles of Confederation. However, the national government was so weak that people soon replaced it with a new constitution with a stronger federal government but reserved certain powers for the states. With the addition of the Bill of Rights, it protected basic individual liberties. This Constitution still provides the basis of the U.S. government today.

Conflicting Views of Government Debates over the new constitution continued as policy debates under the first president, George Washington.

Truly “Founding Fathers,” the leaders of the new government argued over the economy, individual rights, foreign affairs, relations with Native Americans, and the roles of the federal and state governments.

By the end of Washington’s eight years in office, two political parties had emerged. The Democratic-Republicans argued for stronger state governments. The Federalists argued for a stronger federal government. After the Democratic-Republicans defeated the Federalists in the election of 1800, the young country faced a test of political stability. When the Federalists peacefully transferred power to their political rivals, the country passed the test. By 1820, the Federalists had disappeared as a party. However, their ideas continued to have influence through judges and later politicians.

Changes in Economics, Politics, and Culture In the new country, immigrants continued to arrive. As people migrated westward in search of land and economic opportunities, they caused conflicts with the Native Americans living on those lands. The British, French, and Spanish who also claimed North American territory provided additional challenges. The United States had to defend its borders on land and its ships at sea in order to protect its economic and diplomatic interests.

As the United States established its place as a new country, people began to form their own cultures. While the United States declared independence in 1776 and ratified the Constitution in 1788, it was not until after 1800 that a national identity could be recognized.

ANALYZE THE CONTEXT

1. Explain a historical context for the changing relationship between the American colonists and the British government following the Seven Years’ War (the French and Indian War).
2. Explain a historical context for the development of new constitutions and declarations of rights by American political leaders after 1776.
3. Explain a historical context for understanding the regional differences over economic, political, social, and foreign issues that continued along with the formation of the new U.S. cultural and political institutions.

LANDMARK EVENTS: 1750–1800

