

Topic 3.4

Philosophical Foundations of the American Revolution

Government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* 1776

Learning Objective: Explain how and why colonial attitudes about government and the individual changed in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

For Americans, especially those who were in positions of leadership, there was a long tradition of loyalty to the king and Great Britain. As the differences between the colonists and the leaders of Great Britain increased, many Americans tried to justify the diverging directions. As discussed in Topic 2.7, the **Enlightenment**, particularly the writings of John Locke, had a profound influence on the colonies.

Enlightenment Ideas

The era of the Enlightenment was at its peak in the mid-18th century. These were the very years that future leaders of the American Revolution (Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams) were coming to maturity, and their ideas reflected the influence of Enlightenment thought.

Deism Many Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and America were Deists. They believed in God, but in one who had established natural laws in creating the universe and then rarely or never intervened directly in human affairs. God set the rules but then allowed people to make choices. This view of God contrasted with the belief held by most Christians of their time that God regularly intervened in everyday life, often to reward or punish individuals or groups for their actions.

Rationalism In general, Enlightenment thinkers trusted human reason to understand the natural world and to respond to the many problems of life and society. While most were Christians, their trust in reason led them to emphasize studying science and human behavior rather than following traditional interpretations of the Bible.

Social Contract In politics, one important Enlightenment idea was the **social contract**, the concept of an agreement among people to form a government to promote liberty and equality. This idea represented a sharp break from the prevailing assumption that monarchs ruled by divine right—because God had chosen them. Under the social contract, power came from “below,” not from “above.” This philosophy, derived from **John Locke** and others, had been developed further by the French philosopher **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**. Support for a social contract had a profound influence on educated Americans in the 1760s and 1770s—the decades of revolutionary thought and action that finally culminated in the American Revolution.

Thomas Paine’s Argument for Independence

In January 1776, one of the most important pieces of writing by an American colonist was published. The author, **Thomas Paine**, had been born in England before moving to the colonies. His pamphlet, *Common Sense*, argued in clear and forceful language that the colonies should become independent states and break all political ties with the British monarchy. Paine argued that it was contrary to common sense for a large continent to be ruled by a small and distant island and for people to pledge allegiance to a king whose government was corrupt and whose laws were unreasonable.

The pamphlet spread rapidly throughout the colonies and ignited public demands for independence. Unlike earlier writers, who focused their anger on Parliament and the ministers, Paine directly attacked King George III and even the ideas of a monarchy. Paine’s success was based largely on his ability to make complicated, abstract ideas understandable for common readers. *Common Sense* became a key factor in widening the divide between the colonies and Great Britain.



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WHY DID THE COLONIES REBEL?

Did America’s break with Great Britain in the 18th century signify a true revolution with radical change, or was it simply the culmination of evolutionary changes in American life?

Revolution as a Radical Break For many years, the traditional view of the founding of America was that the American Revolution was based on the ideas of the Enlightenment and had fundamentally altered society. In the early 20th century, Progressive historians believed that the movement to end British dominance had provided an opportunity to radically change American society. A new nation was formed with a republican government based on a division of powers between a national and state government and an emphasis on equality and the rights of the individual. The revolution was social as well as political.

Revolution Before the War During the second half of the 20th century, some historians argued that American society had been more democratic and changed long before the war with Great Britain. The war reflected these changes. Historian Bernard Bailyn has suggested that the changes that are

viewed as revolutionary—representative government, expansion of the right to vote, and written constitutions—had all developed earlier during the colonial period. According to this perspective, what was significant about the break from Great Britain was the recognition of an American philosophy based on liberty and democracy that would guide the nation.

Support an Argument Explain two perspectives on how revolutionary the colonial separation from Britain was.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain the new colonial views of the individual and government and the reasons for this in the times leading to the American Revolution.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Philosophy (NAT, SOC)

Enlightenment

Deism

rationalism

social contract

John Locke

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Thomas Paine

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–3 refer to the following excerpt.

“It is inseparably essential to the freedom of a People, and the undoubted Right of Englishmen, that no taxes be imposed on them, but with their own Consent, given personally, or by their representatives. . . . That it is the indispensable duty of these colonies, to the best of sovereigns . . . to procure the repeal of the act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, of all clauses of any other acts of Parliament . . . for the restriction of American commerce.”

Resolutions of the Stamp Act Congress, 1765

1. The above excerpt was primarily directed to which person or group?
(A) Colonial merchants
(B) The king
(C) Leaders in Parliament
(D) Residents of England

2. The philosophical basis behind the excerpt was that the writers
 - (A) accepted Parliament's authority generally but not for direct taxation
 - (B) accepted Parliamentary actions only in specific, limited cases
 - (C) rejected only how Parliament was spending tax revenues
 - (D) rejected Parliament's entire authority as violating the social contract
3. The Enlightenment idea most clearly reflected in this passage was that
 - (A) God rarely intervened in human affairs directly
 - (B) reason was the best guide to understanding the world
 - (C) governments needed popular consent to rule legitimately
 - (D) kings received their authority to rule from God

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

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

1. "I wish I knew what mighty things were fabricating. If a form of government is to be established here, what one will be assumed? Will it be left to our assemblies to choose one? And will not many men have many minds? And shall we not run into dissensions among ourselves?

I am more and more convinced that man is a dangerous creature; and that power, whether vested in many or a few, is ever grasping. . . .

How shall we be governed so as to retain our liberties? Who shall frame these laws? Who will give them force and energy. . . .

When I consider these things, and the prejudices of people in favor of ancient customs and regulations, I feel anxious for the fate of our monarchy or democracy, or whatever is to take place."

Abigail Adams, Letter to John Adams, November 27, 1775

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

- (a) Briefly explain ONE specific perspective expressed by Abigail Adams in the excerpt above.
- (b) Briefly explain ONE historical event or development in the period leading up to independence that led to the view expressed here by Abigail Adams.
- (c) Briefly explain ONE historical event or development in the period leading up to independence that challenged the views expressed here by Abigail Adams.