

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



The Enlightenment and Revolutions, 1550–1800

Lesson 4 The American Revolution

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

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

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

amendment an alteration proposed or effected by parliamentary or constitutional procedure

guarantee to assure the fulfillment of a condition

Content Vocabulary

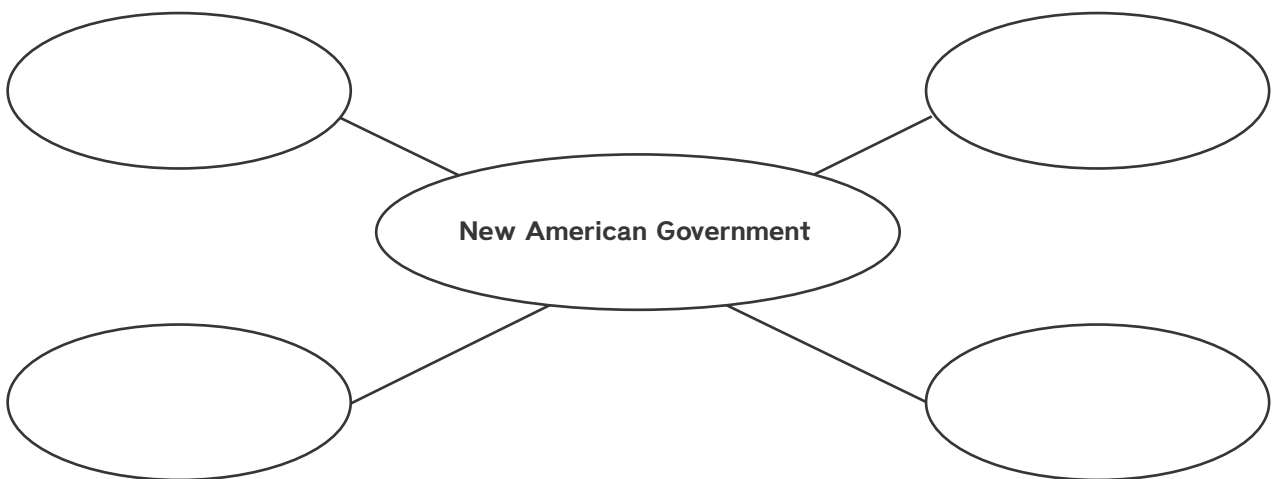
popular sovereignty a principle where a government is created by and subject to the will of the people

diplomatic official according to practices among countries

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

TAKING NOTES: *Summarizing*

ACTIVITY As you read, use a chart like the one below to identify important elements of the government created by the American colonists.



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IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The ideas of the Enlightenment had a clear effect on the colonies in North America. The colonists revolted against British rule because of unfair taxation and other issues. They formed their own army and declared their independence. For many Europeans, the American Revolution put the political dreams of the Enlightenment into action.

Britain and the American Revolution

Guiding Question *What were the causes of and influences on the American Revolution?*

In 1688 the Glorious Revolution had resulted in a Bill of Rights. It affirmed Parliament's right to make laws. As a result, in eighteenth-century Britain, the monarch and the Parliament, or law-making body, shared power. The monarch chose ministers to set policy and guide Parliament. These ministers were supposed to protect the interests of the Crown (the British monarchy). However, Parliament had the power to make laws, levy taxes, and pass the budget (plan for spending money). This means that Parliament indirectly influenced, or had some power over, the ministers of the monarch.

The governments of England and Scotland united in 1707. They formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The term British came to refer to both the English and the Scots.

In 1714 Queen Anne, the last Stuart ruler, died without an heir, so the throne was offered to Queen Anne's nearest relatives. They were Protestant rulers of the German state of Hannover, and they accepted the offer and came to live in Britain. This was the beginning of the Hanoverian dynasty. The first Hanoverian king was George I. He did not speak English. Also, neither George I nor his son George II knew the British system well. As a result, their chief ministers dealt with Parliament.

In the meantime, growing trade and industry led to a growing middle class. This middle class favored more trade and the growth of Britain's world empire. They found a supporter in William Pitt the Elder, who became head of the cabinet of ministers in 1757. He expanded the British Empire by gaining Canada and India in the Seven Years' War.

In North America, 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. More than one million people lived in them by 1750. They were also prosperous.

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

The American Revolution Begins

The Seven Years' War cost Britain a lot of money. Britain also needed money to pay for an army to defend its colonies. British leaders wanted revenue from the American colonies for these costs.

In 1765 Parliament imposed a new tax on the colonies through the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act required certain printed materials, such as legal documents and newspapers, to have a stamp on them. The stamp showed that a tax had been paid to Britain. The colonists opposed the act, often violently. The act was repealed, or officially ended, in 1766. This ended the immediate crisis, but it did not end the real problems between the colonists and the British.

Crisis followed crisis in the 1770s. The colonies organized the First Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in September 1774. Members of the congress urged colonists to arm themselves and to organize militias, or armies of citizens.

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Fighting started between colonists and the British army in April 1775 in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. The Second Continental Congress met soon after the first battles and set up the Continental Army. George Washington was its commander in chief.

Common Sense

The revolution had begun but 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. Thomas Paine published a persuasive pamphlet called *Common Sense*. Paine was born in England. He 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. He argued that King George III was a tyrant. Paine said it was time for the colonists to declare independence. Within three months, *Common Sense* had sold 100,000 copies. George Washington believed that *Common Sense* was making many people change their minds about declaring independence. 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. The American Revolution formally began with this powerful political document.

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 huge. 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. It states that the United States was 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**. Popular sovereignty is the right to govern through the approval 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 was the author of the Declaration of Independence. He was also 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. He favored republicanism. He had 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 greatly influence the formation of the U.S. Constitution in 1787.

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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). Jefferson was a strong presidential figure. He doubled the size of the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. However, Jefferson also set a standard of presidency that emphasized a weak executive power. Thomas Jefferson’s political writings continue to influence American politics today.

British Defeat

The colonies needed support from foreign countries to win the war. Several foreign nations had previously been defeated by the British, so they were eager to get revenge (desire to hurt someone who did them harm). The French supplied weapons and money to the American rebels (people who are rebelling, or revolting). French officers and soldiers also served in Washington’s army. In February 1778, after a British defeat, the French gave **diplomatic** recognition to the new United States. That is, they recognized the United States as an independent country. Spain and the Dutch Republic soon entered the war. The British now faced war with Europeans as well as Americans.

In 1781 at Yorktown, British General Cornwallis was forced to surrender to the French and American forces under the command of George Washington. As a result, the British decided to end the war, and the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. It recognized the independence of the American colonies and gave Americans control of the western territory from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River.



Reading Progress Check

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?*

The former colonies had overthrown British rule. Their experience with British rule had made them fear the power of a strong central government. As a result, the states’ first constitution, the Articles of Confederation (1781), established a weak, ineffective central government that lacked the power to deal with the nation’s problems. In 1787 delegates met in Philadelphia. They held a Constitutional Convention to revise the Articles of Confederation. The delegates decided to plan for an entirely new government.

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The Constitution

The proposed Constitution created a **federal system**. In this system the national, or federal, government and the state governments share power. The organization of the federal government is based on the ideas of Montesquieu. It has three branches, or parts: executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch has power to check, or limit, acts of the other branches.

A president serves as the head of the executive branch. That is why the government can be called a presidential democracy. The legislative branch consists of elected representatives who serve in two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Supreme Court and other courts form the judicial branch. The Constitution was put into effect after ratification, or approval, by 9 of the 13 states.

Many people helped create the U.S. Constitution. However, 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” greatly added to the federal system currently in operation in the United States today. It also contributed to other federal systems of government throughout the world.

The Bill of Rights

During the process of ratifying the Constitution, the new Congress had promised changes. Now the new Congress quickly suggested 12 **amendments** to the Constitution. The states approved 10 of them. These 10 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 (to make requests), and assembly. They give Americans the right to bear arms. It protects citizens against unreasonable searches and arrests. In other words, the government has to have evidence against a person in order to be allowed to search or arrest him or her. The Bill of Rights protects citizens’ property rights. It guarantees trial by jury and due process of law. (Due process makes sure that a person’s legal rights are respected and that the established rules and procedures are followed by the government.)

Many of the rights in the American Bill of Rights came from the natural rights proposed by John Locke and the eighteenth-century philosophes. Many European intellectuals thought the American Revolution had put the principles of the Enlightenment into action. 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?
