

## Course Overview

Successful republican government depends on a well-informed and knowledgeable electorate, and the purpose of this course is rooted in this theme. Students examine the events, political philosophies and social movements that shaped United States history from 1877 to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The analyses of both primary and secondary sources provide opportunities to apply basic concepts of historical thinking and to examine alternative courses of action with their possible repercussions. Significant documents pertinent to the development of the United States as we know it are featured and are studied in their original text. Students also consider the challenges facing future generations of Americans.

## WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS

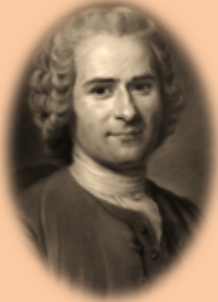




## **Unit Overview**

The development of the United States is based on certain significant documents that have come to define American political philosophy. In this unit, students consider the Declaration of Independence and trace its roots to the Enlightenment. The creation of the United States' first plan for government, the Articles of Confederation, is also discussed.

## **The Impact of the Enlightenment**

The **Enlightenment**, a philosophical movement that swept across Western Europe in the eighteenth century, impacted almost every aspect of colonial America. This was especially true in the areas of government and politics. Documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, were inspired by John Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu and other writers of the age. The American principles of freedom from oppression, government's obligations to its citizens and natural rights are all products of enlightened thought.

Influential Writers of the Enlightenment		
<p><b>Jean-Jacques Rousseau</b> (1712-1778)</p>		<p>Rousseau was born in Switzerland and spent much of his life traveling throughout Europe. His most influential work was <i>The Social Contract</i>. He claimed that humanity's positive character could only be preserved if people were ruled by a government based on their consent. Laws could not be considered binding and should not be obeyed unless they were agreed upon by the people.</p>
<p><b>Montesquieu</b> (1689-1755)</p>		<p>Montesquieu was a French noble who pursued a career in law. While traveling through Europe, he analyzed various types of governments. In <i>The Spirit of the Laws</i>, he concluded that Britain was the best-governed nation of his era because it balanced power among the legislative, executive and judicial branches.</p>
<p><b>John Locke</b> (1632-1704)</p>		<p>John Locke, a British physician and member of the public service corps, expressed his views in <i>Two Treatises of Civil Government</i>. According to Locke, government's job is to protect three basic rights: the right to life, the right to liberty and the right to property. In effect, a social contract exists between leaders and citizens. When a government does not honor this obligation, the citizens are justified in rebelling.</p>

Go to Questions 1 through 4.

### The Declaration of Independence

The **American Revolution** came about following the imposition of a series of taxes, which the colonists viewed as unfair. On the other hand, the British government thought that this was a reasonable way to recover some of the money used to fight wars on the North American continent. In response to a series of new taxes, known as the **Coercive Acts**, delegates from

twelve of the thirteen colonies met in Philadelphia as the **First Continental Congress** in September of 1774. The group issued a Declaration of Rights that affirmed the colonists' loyalty to Britain but disputed the policy of taxation without representation in Parliament. The First Continental Congress also formed a plan to boycott the importation of British goods. The representatives agreed to meet again in May of 1775 if the crown had not addressed their complaints.

When the group reconvened on May 10, 1775 as the **Second Continental Congress**, the American Revolution had already begun. Armed villagers from Lexington and Concord met British soldiers when they marched to seize a stockpile of colonial weapons. Since the non-existent country did not have a federal government, the Second Continental Congress found itself managing the war effort and named George Washington commander. By 1776, an increasing number of American colonists believed that a complete separation from Britain was a necessity. Writers, such as **Thomas Paine**, published convincing arguments in the form of pamphlets that were widely read. Americans were also aware that they might not be able to defeat the British Empire on their own. Independence offered an opportunity to form alliances with France and other powerful British rivals.

### **Thomas Paine: *Common Sense***

However strange it may appear to some, or however unwilling they may be to think so, matters not, but many strong and striking reasons may be given to show that nothing can settle our affairs so expeditiously as an open and determined declaration for independence. Some of which are,

**First.** — It is the custom of Nations, when any two are at war, for some other powers, not engaged in the quarrel, to step in as mediators, and bring about the preliminaries of a peace; But while America calls herself the subject of Great Britain, no power, however well-disposed she may be, can offer her mediation. Wherefore, in our present state we may quarrel on forever.

**Secondly.** — It is unreasonable to suppose that France or Spain will give us any kind of assistance, if we mean only to make use of that assistance for the purpose of repairing the breach, and strengthening the connection between Britain and America; because, those powers would be sufferers by the consequences.

**Thirdly.** — While we profess ourselves the subjects of Britain, we must, in the eyes of foreign nations, be considered as Rebels. The precedent is somewhat dangerous to their peace, for men to be in arms under the name of subjects; we, on the spot, can solve the paradox; but to unite resistance and subjection requires an idea much too refined for common understanding.

**Fourthly.** — Were a manifesto to be published, and dispatched to foreign Courts, setting forth the miseries we have endured, and the peaceful methods which we have ineffectually used for redress; declaring at the same time that not being able longer to live happily or safely under the cruel disposition of the British Court, we had been driven to the necessity of breaking off all connections with her; at the same time, assuring all such Courts of our peaceable disposition towards them, and of our desire of entering into trade with them; such a memorial would produce more good effects to this Continent than if a ship were freighted with petitions to Britain.

Go to Questions 5 through 9.

The provisional government of Virginia instructed its delegation to submit a proposal for independence to the Second Continental Congress. When **Richard Henry Lee** presented this idea, the assembly appointed a committee to draft a declaration of independence in case the proposal passed. It consisted of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, Roger

Sherman and **Thomas Jefferson**, who was given the job of authoring the first draft. Jefferson began the document with an explanation of the need to declare independence and justified this through references to Enlightenment principles. He proclaimed a series of self-evident truths, stressed that authority is derived from the consent of the governed and concluded that a government is rightly overthrown when it violates the social contract.

**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. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government and to provide new Guards for their future security.**

**Thomas Jefferson: Declaration of Independence**

To support the call for independence, Thomas Jefferson went on to list a number of grievances that the colonists had with **King George III** and **Parliament**. Many of these referred to a specific series of events relating to the **French and Indian War**. The colonists interpreted the actions of the British government as tyrannical demands that ignored their rights. The writers of the Enlightenment also had their influence on this aspect of the Declaration of Independence. Compare the passages from John Locke and Thomas Jefferson as quoted in the graphic below. Based on this enlightened line of reasoning, Jefferson concluded that the colonies must become free and independent states. He also established popular sovereignty, individual liberty and republican government as the political values of what would become a new nation.

<p align="center"><i>Of the Dissolution of Government</i> John Locke (1690)</p>	<p align="center"><b>Declaration of Independence</b> (1776)</p>
<p>Secondly, When the prince hinders the legislative from assembling in its due time, or from acting freely, pursuant to those ends for which it was constituted, the legislative is altered: for it is not a certain number of men, no, nor their meeting, unless they have also freedom of debating, and leisure of perfecting, what is for the good of the society, wherein the legislative consists: when these are taken away or altered, so as to deprive the society of the due exercise of their power, the legislative is truly altered; for it is not names that constitute governments, but the use and exercise of those powers that were intended to accompany them; so that he, who takes away the freedom, or hinders the acting of the legislative in its due seasons, in effect takes away the legislative, and puts an end to the government.</p>	<p>He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.</p> <p>He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.</p> <p>He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the meantime exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.</p>

Although it did not convince everyone, the Declaration was widely read at home and abroad. It won support for the American cause in both **France** and **Germany**. On this side of the Atlantic, small towns and large cities celebrated the issue of the Declaration of Independence. Crowds burned effigies of King George III and tore down his statues. Although it was masterfully written in Jefferson's eloquent and clear style, the document was not perfect. Jefferson had included a section that addressed the question of slavery and noted that the continuation of this practice was at odds with America's commitment to liberty. The Second Continental Congress chose to exclude this paragraph from the Declaration of Independence. The document also ignored women, who composed 40% of the population of the colonies. It would be up to future generations to broaden the guarantee of rights for African-Americans, women and other minorities.



Independence Hall: Philadelphia, Pa.



The Declaration of Independence (02:41)

Go to Questions 10 through 16.

## Articles of Confederation

Along with approving the Declaration of Independence in the summer of 1776, the Second Continental Congress also appointed a committee to write a constitution for the new, independent country. Their experience with the British monarchy had convinced Americans that a strong, central government would threaten their new-found freedom. This resulted in a plan that called for a firm league of friendship in which the states retained their power. This plan, known as the **Articles of Confederation**, was adopted by the Second Continental Congress in 1777, but it quickly became embroiled in a controversy.





Stamp Issued to Honor the Articles of Confederation: 1977

The major obstacle that prevented agreement among the states was the problem of the western lands or the areas beyond the Allegheny Mountains. Seven states, including New York and Virginia, claimed vast tracts of land there. Following the American Revolution, they would have the option of using the money made from the sale of these properties to pay off war debts and pensions. The remaining six states would have to raise taxes to pay off similar debts and argued that these holdings could not have been retained if all the states had not fought for independence. Therefore, all states should benefit from the sale of the western lands. Since the Articles of Confederation required the unanimous approval of all thirteen states, this disagreement blocked the ratification process for several years. Eventually, the Second Continental Congress agreed to dispose of the western lands in a more equitable manner, and the Articles of Confederation was officially adopted in 1781.



Go to Questions 16 through 18.

## What's next?

Once the American Revolution concluded with a decisive victory at Yorktown, negotiations to arrange a peace settlement began in Paris in 1782. The diplomatic team of John Jay, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams secured very favorable terms for the Americans. Great Britain recognized the independence of its former colonies along with relinquishing claims to lands south of the Great Lakes and east of the Mississippi River. The British did not demand separate territory for their Indian allies. The **Treaty of Paris** also granted fishing rights off the coasts of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia to the Americans. In spite of the positive outcomes from the peace process, the new nation faced a number of critical issues at home. The Articles of Confederation did not give the federal government adequate strength to manage national and international affairs effectively. **Shays' Rebellion** highlighted the fiscal crisis and the dire economic situation within the individual states. If the United States was to avoid a complete collapse, American leaders recognized that immediate action was necessary. How would the United States strengthen its government, preserve its individual liberties and solve its financial crisis? The next unit provides some of the answers.

Go to Questions 19 through 28.

