

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)

Overview

The American Revolution is of signal importance in the study of American history. First, it severed the colonial relationship with England and legally created the United States. Second, the revolutionary generation formulated the political philosophy and laid the institutional foundations for the system of government under which we live. Third, the Revolution was inspired by ideas concerning natural rights and political authority that were transatlantic in reach, and its successful completion affected people and governments over a large part of the globe for many generations. Lastly, it called into question long-established social and political relationships--between master and slave, man and woman, upper class and lower class, officeholder and constituent, and even parent and child--and thus demarcated an agenda for reform that would preoccupy Americans down to the present day.

In thinking about the causes and course of the Revolution, it is important to study the fundamental principles of the Declaration of Independence; the causes for the outbreak of the war; the main stages of the Revolutionary War and the reasons for the American victory; and the role of wartime leaders, from all strata of society, both on the battlefield and on the home front. In assessing the outcomes of the American Revolution, students need to confront the central issue of how revolutionary the Revolution actually was. In order to reach judgments about this, they necessarily will have to see the Revolution through different sets of eyes--enslaved and free African Americans, Native Americans, white men and women of different social classes, religions, ideological dispositions, regions, and occupations. Students should also be able to see pre- and post-Revolutionary American society in relation to reigning political institutions and practices in the rest of the world.

Students can appreciate how agendas for redefining American society in the postwar era differed by exploring how the Constitution was created and how it was ratified after a dramatic ideological debate in virtually every locale in 1787-88. The Constitution of 1787 and the Bill of Rights should be broached as the culmination of the most creative era of constitutionalism in American history. In addition, students should ponder why the Constitutional Convention sidetracked the movement to abolish slavery that had taken rise in the revolutionary era. Nor should they think that ratification of the Constitution ended debate on governmental power or how to create "a more perfect union." Economic, regional, social, ideological, religious, and political tensions would spawn continuing debates over the meaning of the Constitution for generations.

In studying the post-Revolutionary generation, students can understand how the embryo of the American two-party system took shape, how political turmoil arose as Americans debated the French Revolution, and how the Supreme Court rose to a place of prominence. Politics, political leadership, and political institutions have always bulked large in the study of this era, but students will also need to understand other less noticed topics: the beginnings of a national economy, the exuberant push westward, the military campaigns against Native American nations; the emergence of free black communities; and the democratization of religion.