

Self-Evident

From Loyal Subjects to Independence, 1775–1776

Unit 3 3.4 Philosophical Foundations of the American Revolution

“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.”

Second Continental Congress

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

What the exam expects

Evaluate the extent of change in ideas about American independence from 1763 to 1783.

Ideas changed sharply, from claiming the rights of Englishmen in 1765 to demanding independence in 1776, though **Loyalists** stayed with the king. Congress still professed loyalty in the 1775 **Olive Branch Petition**, but six months later **Common Sense** attacked monarchy itself. The **Declaration of Independence** then used natural rights to justify the break.

Paine's and Jefferson's ideas about government were most consistent with which intellectual movement?

Both drew on the **Enlightenment**, above all on **John Locke**, who argued that people had **natural rights** and that government needed the consent of the governed. Because these ideas made Americans wary of concentrated power, the **Articles of Confederation** set up no executive and gave Congress no power to tax.

What most likely helped prompt Black petitioners in Massachusetts to demand their freedom in 1777?

The **Declaration of Independence** did: the **Prince Hall petition** claimed for enslaved people the same **natural rights** Americans had used to justify breaking with Britain. Elizabeth Freeman made the same argument from the 1780 Massachusetts constitution and won her freedom in court in 1781.

Describe one difference and one similarity between the First Great Awakening and the Enlightenment, and explain one effect of either.

The **Great Awakening** appealed to emotion and personal conversion, while the **Enlightenment** appealed to reason and science. Both came from Europe and taught colonists to challenge authority, from unconverted ministers to kings who ruled by birth. The revivals split churches into New Lights and Old Lights, and Enlightenment ideas of **natural rights** gave the Declaration its case for independence.

Don't mix these up

- ✗ “*Common Sense* blamed Parliament and the king's ministers but spared the king.” Paine attacked George III and monarchy itself, and he called it absurd for an island to rule a continent.
- ✗ “Deists believed God predestined each person's life.” Puritans and other Calvinists believed in predestination, while Deists believed a Creator set natural laws and then rarely intervened.
- ✗ “The Declaration of Independence set up the government of the United States.” It explained and justified independence, while the Articles of Confederation, in force from 1781, were the first written plan of national government.

Study list

	What it was	Why it matters
John Locke 1689	English philosopher whose <i>Two Treatises of Government</i> argued that people had natural rights to life, liberty, and property and that government needed their consent.	His argument that people could replace a government that violated their rights gave colonists grounds to revolt against George III.
Social contract 1689	The idea that people create government by agreement, so its power comes from the people's consent instead of a king's divine right. Americans knew it mainly from John Locke.	Congress applied it directly in the Declaration, which says governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed."
Great Awakening First Great Awakening 1730s–1740s	A wave of Protestant revivals in which preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield stressed a personal, emotional conversion and urged ordinary people to question unconverted ministers.	Revivals split churches into New Lights and Old Lights and taught many colonists to defy religious authority.
Enlightenment 1700s	A movement of European and American thinkers who trusted reason and science over tradition to explain nature and improve government and society. Colonial leaders drew above all on John Locke.	Paine and Jefferson built their case for independence on its ideas of natural rights and of talent over birth.
Deism 1700s	Belief in a Creator who made the universe to run by natural laws and then rarely, if ever, stepped into human affairs. Many Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and America held it.	The Declaration spoke of "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" and cited no scripture, wording that fits the deist outlook.
Virtual representation 1760s	The British argument that Parliament represented the whole empire, colonists included, just as it represented big towns like Manchester that sent no members.	Colonists answered that only assemblies they elected could tax them, so the Stamp Act violated their rights as British subjects.
Second Continental Congress 1775	The colonies' congress that met in Philadelphia from May 1775, created the Continental Army under George Washington, sent the Olive Branch Petition, and declared independence in 1776.	As the war widened and the king refused to bend, delegates who had sought peace in 1775 voted for independence in 1776.

	What it was	Why it matters
Olive Branch Petition 1775	Congress's July 1775 appeal to George III, mostly John Dickinson's work, which professed loyalty, blamed the king's ministers, and asked him to help restore peace.	George III's refusal to receive even this loyal plea pushed moderates in Congress toward independence.
Hereditary privilege 1776	Rank, office, or power that people inherited, such as a king's crown or a noble's title. Enlightenment writers argued that talent and merit should count for more.	Paine mocked "hereditary right in Kings," turning the preference for talent over birth into an argument against any king at all.
Thomas Paine 1776	English-born writer who reached Philadelphia in late 1774 with a letter from Benjamin Franklin. In January 1776 he published <i>Common Sense</i> , the pamphlet that made the popular case for independence.	His plain style carried political argument beyond educated elites to farmers, artisans, and tavern crowds.
<i>Common Sense</i> 1776	Thomas Paine's January 1776 pamphlet urging immediate independence. In plain language it attacked George III and monarchy itself and called it absurd for an island to rule a continent.	It turned many colonists who had blamed only Parliament and the king's ministers against the king himself.
Republicanism 1776	The belief that power comes from the people, who govern through elected representatives, with no hereditary king. Its supporters held that a republic needed virtuous citizens who put the common good first.	After <i>Common Sense</i> , Patriots aimed for a republic, and the new states built governments with no king or nobles.
Loyalists 1775–1783	Colonists who stayed loyal to George III, by most estimates 15 to 20 percent of white colonists, strongest in New York, New Jersey, Georgia, and the port cities.	Their resistance turned the war for independence into a civil war that divided neighbors and families.
Thomas Jefferson 1776	Virginia planter and lawyer who drafted the Declaration of Independence for a committee of five in June 1776. Congress then cut and revised his draft.	He wrote that "all men are created equal" but enslaved hundreds of people in his lifetime, a contradiction critics noted even then.
John Adams 1776	Massachusetts delegate who served on the committee that chose Jefferson to draft the Declaration. In 1815 he wrote Jefferson that the Revolution was "in the minds of the people" before Lexington.	He saw the war as only a result of the Revolution, which had already happened in colonists' minds from 1760 to 1775.

	What it was	Why it matters
Natural rights 1776	Rights people have simply by being human, which no government grants. Locke named life, liberty, and property, and the Declaration listed “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”	Because natural rights did not depend on being British, colonists could use them to justify a government of their own.
Declaration of Independence 1776	Congress’s statement of July 4, 1776, which based government on natural rights and the consent of the governed, charged George III with a long list of abuses, and declared independence.	Americans it left out used its ideals to demand their own rights, as Black petitioners in Massachusetts did in 1777.
Prince Hall petition 1777	A January 1777 petition in which Prince Hall and seven other Black men asked the Massachusetts legislature to free enslaved people, citing the principles Americans had used against Britain.	The legislature passed no law, and slavery in Massachusetts ended only when courts ruled against it in the 1780s.
Articles of Confederation 1777–1789	The first national constitution, which joined the states in a “firm league of friendship” under a weak Congress. John Dickinson wrote its first draft, and the Articles took effect in 1781.	Americans at war with a king and Parliament would not give a central government the powers they were fighting against.

Also in the film

Proclamation of Rebellion 1775	George III’s August 1775 proclamation that declared many colonists in open rebellion, ending hopes he would shield them from Parliament.	
Prohibitory Act 1775	Parliament’s December 1775 ban on all trade with the colonies, which John Adams called an act of independence.	
Lee Resolution 1776	Richard Henry Lee’s June 7, 1776, motion for independence, which Congress approved on July 2, two days before the Declaration.	
Virginia Declaration of Rights 1776	Virginia’s June 1776 bill of rights from George Mason’s draft, with an added clause that let slaveholders exclude enslaved people.	
Lemuel Haynes c. 1776	Black minuteman from Massachusetts whose unpublished essay “Liberty Further Extended” turned the Declaration’s words against slavery.	

Short-answer practice

“As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings.”

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776

(a) Briefly describe ONE argument against monarchy that Paine makes in the excerpt.

(b) Briefly explain ONE way the Declaration of Independence made a similar argument about rights or legitimate government.

(c) Briefly explain how ONE group in the colonies challenged the case against monarchy in 1776.

John Locke 1689 Self-Evident	Social contract 1689 Self-Evident
Great Awakening First Great Awakening 1730s–1740s Self-Evident	Enlightenment 1700s Self-Evident
Deism 1700s Self-Evident	Virtual representation 1760s Self-Evident
Second Continental Congress 1775 Self-Evident	Olive Branch Petition 1775 Self-Evident
Hereditary privilege 1776 Self-Evident	Thomas Paine 1776 Self-Evident

The idea that government is an agreement among the people and rests on their consent.

Power flowed up from the people instead of down from God.

The 1700s movement that trusted reason and science to explain the world and improve government.

It appealed to reason, where the Great Awakening appealed to emotion.

Britain's claim that Parliament spoke for all subjects, even colonists who elected no members.

The slogan "no taxation without representation" rejected it.

Congress's 1775 plea to George III that professed loyalty and asked for peace.

George III refused to receive it and gave no answer.

The English-born writer of *Common Sense*, the 1776 pamphlet that made the case for independence.

His *American Crisis* essays rallied Patriots after early defeats.

English philosopher who argued that people had natural rights and that government needed their consent.

The Declaration's preamble restates his ideas of rights and consent.

Protestant revivals in which Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield preached an emotional, personal conversion.

Like the Enlightenment, it challenged established authority.

Belief in a Creator who set the universe running by natural laws and rarely intervened.

Deists trusted reason and nature over scripture and miracles.

The colonies' congress from 1775 that raised the Continental Army and declared independence.

It governed the United States until the Articles took effect in 1781.

Power or rank that came by birth, which Enlightenment thinkers valued less than individual talent.

Americans wanted leaders who earned power instead of inheriting it.

<i>Common Sense</i> 1776 Self-Evident	Republicanism 1776 Self-Evident
Loyalists 1775–1783 Self-Evident	Thomas Jefferson 1776 Self-Evident
John Adams 1776 Self-Evident	Natural rights 1776 Self-Evident
Declaration of Independence 1776 Self-Evident	Prince Hall petition 1777 Self-Evident
Articles of Confederation 1777–1789 Self-Evident	

The belief that the people should rule through elected representatives, with no king.

Fear of tyranny kept most early state governors weak.

The Virginian who drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Congress cut the draft clause that blamed the king for the slave trade.

Rights every person has by being human, such as life and liberty, which no government grants.

Unlike English liberties, they belonged to everyone.

A 1777 petition in which Prince Hall and other Black men demanded freedom as a natural right.

It applied the Declaration's ideals to enslaved people.

Paine's 1776 pamphlet that attacked George III and monarchy itself and urged independence.

Congress declared independence six months later.

Colonists who sided with the king, about 15 to 20 percent of white colonists.

Their numbers undercut Adams's claim that minds changed before the war.

Massachusetts revolutionary who wrote in 1815 that the Revolution was "in the minds of the people."

He dated the Revolution to the 1760s, when Britain tightened control.

Congress's 1776 statement that based government on natural rights and consent and declared the colonies independent.

Black petitioners in 1777, and women in 1848, used its words to claim rights.

The first U.S. constitution, which created a weak Congress and left most power with the states.

Without the power to tax, Congress could not pay its debts.

Model answers

- (a) Briefly describe ONE argument against monarchy that Paine makes in the excerpt.

Paine argued that monarchy violated the equal rights of nature, since no one man deserved to stand so far above the rest. He added that scripture agreed, citing Gideon, who refused to rule the Israelites, and Samuel, who warned them against kings.

- (b) Briefly explain ONE way the Declaration of Independence made a similar argument about rights or legitimate government.

Like Paine, Congress based legitimate government on equal rights. In July 1776 the Declaration called it self-evident that “all men are created equal” and said governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

- (c) Briefly explain how ONE group in the colonies challenged the case against monarchy in 1776.

Loyalists such as Charles Inglis, an Anglican minister in New York, answered *Common Sense* in 1776. Inglis argued that limited monarchy was “most favourable to liberty” and warned that independence would bring war and disorder.