

PROMPT: The consequences of the Revolutionary War were not as democratic as some of the more zealous Patriots would have liked; continuity, rather than change, was more evident in the aftermath of the war. Support, modify, or refute this statement. Consider the period 1763-1797 (end of French and Indian War to end of Washington's administration).

DOCUMENT 1: Letters from John Adams to James Sullivan, 1776

It is certain in Theory, that the only moral Foundation of Government is the Consent of the People, But to what an Extent Shall We carry this Principle? . . . But let us first Suppose, that the whole Community of every Age, Rank, Sex, and Condition, has a Right to vote. This Community, is assembled—a Motion is made and carried by a Majority of one Voice. The Minority will not agree to this. Whence arises the Right of the Majority to govern, and the Obligation of the Minority to obey? from Necessity, you will Say, because there can be no other Rule. But why exclude Women? You will Say, because their Delicacy renders them unfit for Practice and Experience, in the great Business of Life, and the hardy Enterprises of War, as well as the arduous Cares of State. . . .

Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open So fruitfull a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End of it. New Claims will arise. . . . It tends to confound and destroy all Distinctions, and prostrate (level) all Ranks, to one common Level.

DOCUMENT 2: Federalist Paper No. 68—Alexander Hamilton, 1788

THE mode of appointment of the Chief Magistrate [president] of the United States . . . is pretty well guarded. I venture somewhat further, and hesitate not to affirm, that if the manner of it be not perfect, it is at least excellent. It unites in an eminent degree all the advantages, the union of which was to be wished for.

It was . . . desirable, that the immediate election should be made by men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station, and acting under circumstances favorable to deliberation, and to a judicious combination of all the reasons and inducements which were proper to govern their choice. A small number of persons, selected by their fellow-citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations.

DOCUMENT 3: Thomas Jefferson to William S. Smith, 1787, in response to Shay's Rebellion

What country before ever existed a century & half without a rebellion? & what country can preserve it's liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon & pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. It is it's natural manure. Our Convention has been too much impressed by the insurrection of Massachusetts: and in the spur of the moment they are setting up a kite to keep the hen-yard in order.

DOCUMENT 4: Vermont Constitution, 1777

A DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE STATE OF VERMONT: THAT all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, amongst which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty; acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety. Therefore, no male person, born in this country, or brought from over sea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person, as a servant, slave or apprentice, after he arrives to the age of twenty-one Years, nor female, in like manner, after she arrives to the age of eighteen years, unless they are bound by their own consent, after they arrive to such age, or bound by law, for the payment of debts, damages, fines, costs, or the like.

DOCUMENT 5: Excerpt from the 1791 “Bank Bill”

Whereas it is conceived that the established of a bank for the United States . . . will be very conducive to the successful conducting of the national finances; will tend to give facility to the obtaining of loans, for the use of the government, in sudden emergencies; and will be productive of considerable advantages to trade and industry in general: Therefore,

Section 1. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of American in Congress assembled, That a bank of the United States shall be established

DOCUMENT 6: Federalist No. 78—Alexander Hamilton, 1788

Whoever attentively considers the different departments of power must perceive, that, in a government in which they are separated from each other, the judiciary, from the nature of its functions, will always be the least dangerous to the political rights of the Constitution; because it will be least in a capacity to annoy or injure them. The Executive not only dispenses the honors, but holds the sword of the community. The legislature not only commands the purse, but prescribes the rules by which the duties and rights of every citizen are to be regulated. The judiciary, on the contrary, has no influence over either the sword or the purse; no direction either of the strength or of the wealth of the society; and can take no active resolution whatever. It may truly be said to have neither FORCE nor WILL, but merely judgment; and must ultimately depend upon the aid of the executive arm even for the efficacy of its judgments.

DOCUMENT 7: Articles of Confederation, 1777

II.

Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled.

III.

The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever.

Exemplar Essay

After a lengthy period of relative harmony between the British American colonies and the British Empire, the United States of America declared itself a sovereign nation in the Declaration of Independence (1776), written during the “Revolutionary” War. Citing oppression and denial of “unalienable rights,” the new country championed the natural rights of every man in writing, as many Enlightenment thinkers had done in Europe for about a century. In reality, though, America experienced more continuity of the past than change in the years following the Revolutionary War. Some of the most powerful political leaders were elitists who did not fully believe in the “unalienable rights” they talked about, and their fear of the common man and belief in their own superiority resulted in a national government that perpetuated classism and stretched their responsibility past the scope of their rightful influence.

John Adams, a Federalist, had his doubts about the capability of all men (and women) to control the government. In a letter to James Sullivan in 1776, he outlined every reason why expanding the vote to the “lessers” would result in chaos and mob rule (Document 1). While his “slippery slope” argument is weak, he illustrated the mindset of many American elites in his mistrust of the lower class, a principle which was expressed in the Constitution of 1787 in more ways than one. A prime example would be the undemocratic Electoral College, which Alexander Hamilton, another Federalist, defended in his Federalist Paper #68, written in an effort to get the Constitution ratified by all of the states, particularly the ones with strong Antifederalist sentiment. From his (and many other Founders’) perspective, the educated men of status—which in this case were electors—had a responsibility to look after the common folk and make wise decisions for them in a paternalistic way (Document 2). Both men (Adams and Hamilton) supported ideas far from those outlined in the Declaration of Independence, which asserted boldly that “all men are created equal,” and their continued political prominence *after* the Revolution (Adams as Vice President and later, President, and Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury under President Washington) shows the lack of change, at least among the elites.

In Washington’s new government, established in 1789, Federalists showcased their support for a strong, central government with their liberal usage of the necessary and proper clause (“elastic clause”), located in Article I of the Constitution. The ability to justify federal laws and responsibilities not specifically enumerated in the Constitution manifested itself in the National Bank, signed into law in 1791 with Hamilton’s urging and Jefferson’s disapproval (Document 5). Such an act stood in contrast to the powers of the national government under the first Constitution, the Articles of Confederation. This Revolution-era document delegates all responsibilities not *expressly* delegated to the federal government to the states, whereas the post-Revolution Constitution puts more power in the hands of the federal and highly undemocratic government, contrary to espoused revolutionary ideals (Document 7). While it is true that the bank would be critical in the infant country’s economic development, it also signaled that continuity, rather than change, would characterize America’s political and economic landscape, with the new government taking on significant economic powers, much to the chagrin of the growing Democratic-Republican party, whose members—usually commoners/farmers—preferred more localized government, particularly after their experiences with Britain and the War.

A strong central government was also evident in the creation of the judiciary. Outlined in Article III of the Constitution, the judiciary was made to be immune to the will of the people as an unelected branch serving life terms. Though some, like Hamilton, tried to defend such an institution for its lack of power and merely “judgment” (Document 6), its undemocratic nature is surely a betrayal of the Revolutionary ideals zealots like the Sons of Liberty fought for. Rivals of the elitist-leaning Federalist Party were Democratic-Republicans, who did a better job representing democratic ideals that true Patriots would support. Their party leader, Thomas Jefferson, espoused such democratic ideals before the strong central government was created by the Constitution. In response to Shays’ Rebellion (1786-7), Jefferson insinuated that he supported the rebels who were resisting Massachusetts state law, which they found unfair. In a letter to William S. Smith, Jefferson asked, “What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance” (Document 3)? Shays’ indicated that the Revolution had unleashed democratic forces, which most of the elites would grow alarmed by. This would also be evident during Washington’s administration in the Whiskey Rebellion. Democratic forces were also apparent in some of the state constitutions that were written after the Declaration of Independence, including PA and VT, the latter of which abolished slavery in 1777 (Document 4). Though vestiges of change can be seen in the post-Revolutionary period, they were overshadowed by the continuation of the status quo—elite rule coupled with strong central government.

All the ideas of equality and liberty looked revolutionary during the Revolution and served to bring the country together in opposition to Britain's "taxation without representation." But in the aftermath of victory, many were only interested in preserving the old ways and were somewhat successful in doing so. Elitists ruled the country and shaped the Constitution, perpetuating a fear of pure democracy and paternally justifying what many Democratic-Republicans saw as government overreach. However many people declared the spirit of the American Revolution ever-present, it is clear the "architects of liberty" strengthened the walls between them and the common man behind a façade of individual freedom. But to them, it was all for the people's own good, not for the people to rule, which is why they created a republic, and *not* a democracy. In the end, perhaps Americans should be grateful that continuity characterized these years. Had change been more present, with greater democracy, localized politics, and incorporation of the common man, perhaps the American experiment would have devolved to anarchy. Instead, through more of a political evolution, the young nation was able to grow stronger, giving it the time and space it needed to become more of the democratic country it espoused itself to be.