

Big Ideas

Unit 1: Foundations of a New Nation

Why have historians grouped the British colonies in North America into three distinct colonial regions?

- When historians investigate past events, they consider the overall context in which those events occurred. This includes understanding the temporal (time/when) and spatial (geography/where) circumstances in which the event occurred. By understanding both time and place, we can begin to appreciate differences in economic, sociocultural, and political factors when exploring past events.
- Every place has geographic factors that influence how people live. Geographic factors consist of the natural/physical environment including the resources found there, and how humans interact with those features and resources.
- Social scientists also consider economic, sociocultural, and political factors that can make a place distinct.
 - Economic factors involve the use of resources that have value to individuals or groups of people.
 - Sociocultural factors involve identities, customs, and traditions of groups of people.
 - Political factors involve how groups make decisions (power and authority).
- Due to the influence of geography on human life ways, historians and geographers use the idea of “regions” to narrow their investigations of the past so they are more accurate. A “region” is an area that shares at least one common characteristic (geographic, economic, sociocultural, and/or political).
- Over time, thirteen distinct British colonies emerged in North America, which historians have grouped into three colonial regions. Each colonial region shared some economic, political, and sociocultural factors that set it apart from the other colonial regions.

Why do people form governments?

- When people live in groups, they find it necessary to establish rules to maintain order and ensure survival.
- Our ideas about government are based on the belief that every human being is endowed with natural rights - life, liberty, and property.
- Political philosophers during the Enlightenment period (late 1500s – late 1700s) considered the purposes of government by first considering what would happen in a state of nature – a situation without government, laws, or any authority. In a “state of nature”, people would be in a constant state of conflict over the resources they need to survive.
- According to Enlightenment philosophers, in order to protect their natural rights, people form governments. In other words, people are willing to give up their right to do whatever they want in exchange for their survival and security.
- In forming governments, people consent or agree to give up their right to do whatever they want in exchange for the protection of their natural rights to life, liberty, and property. This agreement is called a social contract or social compact.

How did ideas about government influence the political thought of the English colonists in America?

- English colonists used ideas from the Enlightenment period (focusing on science and reason) to determine how they should live together and the role of government in their lives.
- Building on the ideas of Natural Rights philosophers, the colonists believed that all people are born with “natural rights” and that among these are life, liberty, and property. People enter into a social contract with each other and agree to give up their right to do whatever they want in order to protect their natural rights.
- The colonists relied on how people entered into a social contract in the past. Three examples of this are Magna Carta, Mayflower Compact, and the English Bill of Rights.
- Magna Carta established limits on the power of government and is considered to be the first step in the emergence of limited government in England. It has influenced people’s ideas about government since 1215.
- The Pilgrims entered into a social compact called the Mayflower Compact, which was the first governing document of the English colonists in North America.
- Parliament greatly expanded the idea of limited government with the English Bill of Rights in 1689.
- These documents, along with John Locke’s philosophy, focus on how people should live together. Collectively, they formed a road map for the English colonists in America to create a system of government that would protect natural rights (life, liberty and property) through a social compact.

How are ideas about government reflected in the Declaration of Independence?

- The Declaration of Independence relies on a range of ideas from previous events in English history and natural rights philosophers.
- The Declaration identifies “self-evident” truths – ideas that are obvious or true by their very nature – that people have certain rights that cannot be denied. These include that “all men are created equal” and have the right to life and liberty, which natural rights philosophers had emphasized in their writings.
- The Declaration uses the ideas of the social compact to explain what constitutes a legitimate government. The Declaration claims that a legitimate government gets its power from the people (consent of the government).
- The Declaration claims that people have a right to change or abolish their government when it fails to protect the people and their natural rights (right of revolution).

How and why did the relationship between Great Britain and her colonies change?

- For many years, Great Britain was unable to focus its attention on enforcing some of its laws affecting the American colonies because of wars with France and other issues. Historians refer to this time as the period of **salutary neglect**.
- During wars with the French, Great Britain fought to protect its economic interests in the American colonies.
- Great Britain expended blood and treasure to protect the American colonies. They believed the colonists should pay their fair share for the cost of the wars. They began to pass additional laws and enforce old ones.
- Since the colonists contributed troops and money as well, they disagreed with Britain’s perspective. This led to growing tensions between Great Britain and her American colonies.

How did some colonists (patriots) make a case against British rule?

- At first, many colonists wanted to repair their relationship with Great Britain more than they wanted to declare independence.
- As the relationship between the colonies and the British government changed, Boston, Massachusetts became the center of colonial-British conflict.
- In Boston and elsewhere, political and business leaders tried to build public support for their concerns and create a movement to rebel against British rule.
- Colonial leaders employed propaganda, a systematic method of communicating ideas to influence a population toward a cause or position, in order to convince others to join their cause. The pamphlet *Common Sense* was one example of propaganda from the revolutionary period.
- Propaganda still exists today. While propagandists present information, which may be true or false, they carefully select it for its political effect and communicate it to influence others.

How does the Declaration of Independence reflect the idea of the people (the governed) as the source of power and authority of government?

- The Declaration of Independence was an argument designed to persuade people and nations that the colonies were justified in separating from Great Britain to establish an independent nation.
- The authors of the Declaration of Independence used Natural Rights Philosophy and social compact theory of government in their argument for independence from Great Britain.
- According to the Declaration, people can and should overthrow the government when it violates the social contract. This can occur when governments no longer respect people's fundamental rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- In the Declaration of Independence, the colonists justified their belief that Great Britain was no longer a valid authority over them by listing grievances. These grievances were complaints about British government's actions that harmed the colonists in violation of the social contract

Big Ideas

Unit 2: Creating a New Government

How did the colonies govern themselves after declaring independence?

- During the Revolutionary War, the individual states adopted the Articles of Confederation for their collective security (defense of their people and borders).
- Under the Articles of Confederation, the states created a confederate form of government.
- A confederation is a form of government in which the individual states have considerable independence from the central government.
- Under the Articles of Confederation, the central government did not have the power to regulate trade among the states or with foreign nations, nor did it have the power to tax.
- Despite these weaknesses, the government under the Articles of Confederation successfully provided a method of adding new states through the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Were Shays and his followers justified in their actions?

- At the conclusion of the American Revolution, many of the newly formed states were deeply in debt due to their participation in the Revolutionary War.
- Since the Articles of Confederation did not give the central government power to tax, the cost of the war was mainly the responsibility of the states.
- To raise money to pay for the war effort, some states increased taxes, which angered poor farmers. Many of these poor farmers had fought against taxation in the Revolution but now faced jail time, loss of property, and the loss of their voting rights for not paying taxes.
- In Massachusetts and elsewhere poor farmers rebelled. Known as Shays' Rebellion, this event, along with other problems, led some Americans to question whether the Articles of Confederation needed to be changed.

Why did the delegates want to alter the Articles of Confederation, and what role did the different perspectives of states play?

- The deficiencies of the Articles of Confederation led many leaders of the states to call for a meeting to alter certain aspects of the Articles of Confederation.
- Though many state leaders still feared an over-reaching central government, some delegates to the convention favored strengthening the central government's power relative to the states.
- Some of the major issues at the convention were the balance of power (decision-making) between state governments and the central government, election of the executive, slavery, and representation in the legislature.
- States varied on how they wanted to resolve these issues based on their perspective.

How did compromise around the issues of power and slavery affect the creation of the Constitution?

- At the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, the delegates decided that a new plan of government was necessary.
- Because the states had different ideas about power and slavery, compromise was necessary to create a new government.
- One of the issues about power was how to balance the authority of the central government with that of the states. Through compromise, the delegates resolved this issue by creating a federal system of government (federalism). Under this system, states retained some power for themselves (reserved powers), gave some powers to the federal government (delegated or enumerated powers), and allowed some powers to be shared (concurrent powers).
- Another issue about power involved representative government. The delegates addressed this issue by creating a bicameral legislature. Representation in the Senate was equal, while a state's population determined representation in the House of Representatives. This compromise is known as the "Great Compromise" or "The Connecticut Compromise."
- A third issue involving power concerned whether the executive branch should be comprised of a small group or one person. The delegates agreed to have one person serve as president.
- The delegates compromised on several issues related to slavery.

- They agreed to count enslaved people as $3/5^{\text{th}}$ of a person for taxation and representation. This is known as the “Three-Fifths Compromise”.
- The delegates also agreed to allow the slave trade to continue for 20 years, after which the importation of enslaved persons would end.
- Nobody was satisfied with the compromises concerning slavery, which would be an ongoing dilemma and ultimately a catastrophe for the new nation.

How did the Framers of the Constitution use inherited principles to create a unique form of government to empower “We the People”?

- The Constitution of the United States is built on a number of core or fundamental principles.
- The principles of the United States Constitution can be traced back to early English history, the influences of the Enlightenment period thinkers, and colonial experiences with the British government.
- Using the philosophical principles of inalienable rights, consent of the governed, and social compact, the Framers designed a unique form of government where the people are the ultimate source of all political power. In doing so, they grounded their government in the principle of popular sovereignty.
- The Framers also drew on other principles of government to empower “We the People,” such as the rule of law, limited government, and equality.
- With these inherited principles in mind, the Framers created the Constitution with certain mechanisms designed to promote and protect the power of the people.
- These constitutional mechanisms include:
 - a written constitution where the people delegate only certain powers to the federal government;
 - a federal system, where the powers not given to the federal government remain with the states and the people;
 - representative government, where people have a say in who represents them through elections;
 - separation of powers, where the legislative, executive, and judicial powers are assigned to different branches to prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful;
 - a system of checks and balances, where each branch of government has the ability to restrain the power of the other branches;
 - an amendment process, which enables the people’s government to adapt to changes over time; and
 - a Bill of Rights, which protects individual rights from tyranny of the majority.

How does the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution establish the purposes of our government?

- The Constitution is a written document that outlines the social compact. In creating a written constitution, the Framers intended it to be the supreme law that would limit the powers of government, ensure the rule of law, and protect popular sovereignty.
- The Constitution limits the power of government by creating a government of delegated powers. This means that the government only has those powers that the people have given it in the Constitution.
- The Constitution contains a Preamble that describes the purposes for creating a new form of government.
- According to the Preamble, the six purposes (objectives) of the Constitution are to:
 - Form a more perfect union
 - Establish justice
 - Ensure domestic tranquility
 - Provide for the common defense
 - Promote the general welfare
 - Secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and for future generations.
- Sometimes in addressing public issues, these purposes conflict with one another.

How does government under the Constitution work to protect “We the People” from tyranny?

- Tyranny is the arbitrary or random use of power. The Framers designed our system of government to protect the people from the tyranny they had experienced under British rule.
- In creating the Constitution, the Framers wanted to ensure that “We the People” would be the ultimate source of all power and authority in the United States.
- The Framers used several mechanisms or structures to protect the people from tyranny:
 - Representative Government: People, through the election process, have a voice in deciding which individuals will represent their interests in governmental matters.
 - Separation of Powers: Powers delegated to the federal government are separated among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government to ensure that no one branch would become too powerful.

- Checks and Balances: Each branch also has the power to limit the actions of the other branches.
- Through the constitutional mechanisms of separation of powers and checks and balances, the Framers tried to safeguard against the concentration of power.
- Through the constitutional mechanism of representative government/republicanism, “We the People” have the power through elections to replace our governmental officials when we believe they do not act in our best interests.

Why were the Framers in conflict over the adoption of the Constitution?

- Once the Constitution was drafted, three-quarters of the states had to ratify or accept the new Constitution for it to become effective.
- Some of the Framers expressed concern that the Constitution gave too much power to the central government and put states’ rights and individual liberties at risk.
- Two camps developed. Those who favored the new constitution called themselves “Federalists.” They called those who opposed them “Antifederalists.” Both groups sought to convince the American public of their position on the issues.
- The Federalists published a series of essays, known collectively as “the Federalist Papers.” These essays sought to calm fears about the new government under the Constitution.
- The Federalist Papers are considered one of the most important sources for interpreting and understanding the original intent of the Constitution.

What is the Bill of Rights and what does it protect?

- The first ten amendments to the United States Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights protects political, personal, and economic rights of individuals, as well as the rights of states.
- The First Amendment protects freedom of expression through five distinct freedoms: religion, speech, press, assembly, and the right to petition the government for redress of grievances. Two separate clauses secure religious freedom: the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause.
- Other amendments protect individual rights, safeguard rights for the accused, and prohibit cruel and unusual punishment.

- The 9th and 10th Amendments protect the states and the people by describing the limits of power of the central government. Together, these amendments support the concept of delegated powers.
- The Bill of Rights limits the power of government. It does not apply to actions of private individuals such as your parents.
- The judicial branch determines the scope and limits of the rights in the Bill of Rights.