

“THE AMERICAN FOUNDING”

HISTORY 102 · WEEK FOUR

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OVERVIEW

Prior to the Revolutionary War, the tradition of self-government in America was nurtured by the English common law tradition and the original charters of the American colonies, no less than by the constraints of geography. The debates in the colonies regarding representation and taxation grew out of the larger practical and theoretical debates in England on the nature and extent of the principle of sovereignty, the power and authority of the monarch in relation to Parliament, and the rights of citizens and natural rights, in the wake of the social and political changes resulting from the Glorious Revolution.

LECTURE SUMMARY

The charters that established the English colonies in America also recognized and affirmed the colonists' rights as Englishmen, chief of which was a measure of self-government ensured through local representative institutions. While the king or the proprietors of the respective colony would appoint a governor general, each colony also had an appointed council and a local elected assembly. The governor's actual power was minimal in contrast to his stated power, as he was dependent on the elected assembly of the colony for his salary, and as his acts could be appealed by the colony to government ministers and colonial agents in England.

The effects of Parliament becoming the supreme power in Britain in the wake of the Glorious Revolution were felt in the American colonies, as successive prime ministers enacted measures against the colonial representative bodies to allow the colonial governors autonomy from them while ensuring complete dependence upon Parliament. Parliament passed a series of punitive laws against the American colonies, such as the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts, and the later “Intolerable Acts,” which directly violated the colonists' constitutional rights, their natural rights, and their colonial charters, by denying the principle of the consent of the governed.

It was “the long train of abuses and usurpations” of this period which fueled the appeal to the natural rights asserted in the Declaration of Independence, and which was upheld by the fighting of the American Revolution.

KEY PASSAGES FROM THE LECTURE

"That these are our grievances which we have thus laid before his majesty, with that freedom of language and sentiment which becomes a free people claiming their rights, as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate: Let those flatter who fear; it is not an American art. To give praise which is not due might be well from the venal, but would ill besem those who are asserting the rights of human nature. They know, and will therefore say, that kings are the servants, not the proprietors of the people. Open your breast, sire, to liberal and expanded thought [...]. You have no ministers for American affairs, because you have none taken from among us, nor amenable to the laws on which they are to give you advice. It behoves you, therefore, to think and to act for yourself and your people."

- "A Summary View of the Rights of British America"

"Lest this declaration should disquiet the minds of our friends and fellow-subjects in any part of the empire, we assure them that we mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us, and which we sincerely wish to see restored. -- Necessity has not yet driven us into that desperate measure[.]"

- "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms"

"When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

- "The Declaration of Independence"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can the United States be considered as a "Novus Ordo Seclorum" (a new order)? Did it break completely with its English heritage? In what ways might the United States be understood as the culmination, rather than the destruction, of the English and Western traditions and heritage?
2. How do the three main readings (The Summary View, The Declaration of Causes, and The Declaration of Independence) differ in purpose and in principle?
3. Dr. Rahe identifies three ends which the American colonists sought to achieve in the Declaration of Independence. What are these?

NOTES:

All reading assignments for History 102 are drawn from Hillsdale's publication, American Heritage: A Reader. You can receive a printed copy of the American Heritage reader for a tax-deductible donation of \$100. Donate today at <https://online.hillsdale.edu/support>.

