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Teaching American History  
A More Perfect Union,  
The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution

### **The Enlightenment Thinkers' Influence on the Original Documents of the United States**

High school history students studying the period of the American Revolution and the establishment of the U.S. Constitution are often led to focus on “the who”, “the what”, “the where”, and “the when”. They are too infrequently challenged to discover “the how” or “the why” of this country’s inception and the documents that framed our government.

This project is a unit of five lessons developed to guide Advanced Placement U.S. History students toward discovering the concepts behind the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution by sampling some of the classic works of the Enlightenment thinkers. Excerpts from the works of John Locke, Baron de Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacque Rousseau are assigned to be read and compared to the Declaration of Independence, elements of our Constitution, and the six Federalist Papers identified as seminal works by the state’s department of education. Students are to gauge how some of those Enlightenment ideas eventually manifested themselves in America’s early legal documents.

### **Massachusetts Frameworks**

USI.2 Explain the historical and intellectual influences on the American Revolution and the formation and framework of the American government. (H, C)

B. the political theories of such European philosophers as Locke and Montesquieu  
*Seminal Primary Documents to Read:* Mayflower Compact (1620)  
*Seminal Primary Documents to Consider:* Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641) and John Locke’s Treatises of Civil Government (1690)

USI.3 Explain the influence and ideas of the Declaration of Independence and the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson. (H, C)

*Seminal Primary Documents to Read:* the Declaration of Independence (1776)

USI.7 Explain the roles of various founders at the Constitutional Convention. Describe the major debates that occurred at the Convention and the “Great Compromise” that was reached. (H, C)

*Major Debates*

- A. the distribution of political power
- B. the rights of individuals
- C. the rights of states
- D. slavery

*Seminal Primary Documents to Read:* the U.S. Constitution

USI.8 Describe the debate over the ratification of the Constitution between Federalists and Anti-Federalists and explain the key ideas contained in the Federalist Papers on federalism, factions, checks and balances, and the importance of an independent judiciary. (H, C)

*Seminal Primary Documents to Read:* Federalist Paper number 10

*Seminal Primary Documents to Consider:* Federalist Papers numbers 1, 9, 39, 51, and 78

USI.9 Explain the reasons for the passage of the Bill of Rights. (H, C)

A. the influence of the British concept of limited government

B. the particular ways in which the Bill of Rights protects basic freedoms, restricts government power, and ensures rights to persons accused of crimes

*Seminal Primary Documents to Read:* the Bill of Rights (1791)

## **Objectives**

The objectives are

1. to examine the ideological development of the framers of America's founding documents;
2. to identify strands of ideas found in earlier works of the European Age of Reason or Enlightenment period and later incorporated into the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the arguments for the Constitution's ratification.
3. to increase students' research, analytical, and communications skills through their reading and comparisons of the assigned primary sources, and to express their findings in class discussions and in a final essay assessment that is based on the unit's assigned documents and questions.

## **Time Frame**

The time frame is five classes, five lessons.

## **Background**

The Enlightenment thinkers recorded social and cultural trends and they influenced those trends in the eighteenth century. Social, cultural, and scientific revolutions in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century also nurtured greater discourse on the nature of the individual, politics and government than had been experienced in centuries. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and others were

among the British and French thinkers who had published classic essays or treatises on the nature of society and the administration of government.

The Scientific Revolution that began in the seventeenth century contributed to an agricultural revolution that resulted in more food, better diets and eventually population growth. It also contributed to social changes as scientific methods were then being applied to measure societies. This scientific revolution also advanced navigation and ship designs, contributing toward the Age of Exploration.

The Protestant Reformation's influence went beyond religion and also affected society and eventually European governments and politics. The religious wars of the sixteenth centuries in Europe challenged the ancient dogma of the Roman Catholic Church and challenged the foundations of divine right and the absolute monarchies that it supported. This by the mid-1700s had further led to keener examinations of the nature of the individual, politics and government than had been experienced in centuries.

For example, Darren Staloff in his book *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* Voltaire admired Locke for he had “dared to doubt,” and that Locke, according to Voltaire, “instead of defining in one fell swoop what we don't know, he examines by degrees what by degrees what we want to know.”<sup>1</sup>

In short, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe were a period of great changes in philosophy, religion, government and society. Many of the new settlements in the New World, and especially the more permanent and well developed settlements in the British North American colonies, embraced these new Enlightenment philosophies. We can find many of them in the founding documents of the United States.

## **Materials**

Materials for the unit include many outside readings, some of which are in the handouts others are on websites; most of these are primary sources. They include excerpts from philosophical works such as Baron de Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*, John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, and Jean-Jacque Rousseau's *A Social Contract*. Further readings of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers could also include works by David Hume, Thomas Hobbes, Voltaire, and Adam Smith. Although nearly all of the *Federalist Papers* could be used, the Massachusetts Department of Education Frameworks specifies Numbers 1, 9, 10, 39, 51 and 78 for consideration, and these are included in the handouts. The *Mayflower Compact* is also suggested by DOE and is included in the handouts. The students' textbook, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, explores the topic in chapter 7 “Forging a National Republic” and chapter 8 “Politics and Society in an Early Republic”; it provides very good background information. The textbook also provides copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

## **Procedures**

This unit should complement students' traditional curriculum regarding our key documents. The events of the years that followed the French and Indian (Seven Years') War and up through the Revolution should have been covered prior to this unit. This would include the various revenue and punitive acts imposed by the British on the British American colonists, the colonists' reactions, the events in the colonial assemblies and the early Continental Congress. This unit follows after having completed lessons on the Revolutionary War itself, the military campaigns, the period's social, economic and cultural characteristics of the colonies, and the Treaty of Paris. These prior lessons would have involved using the class's textbook and conventional materials for Document Based Questions. In a greater sense, *this project's* unit is like a grand DBQ exercise and assessment on the theories behind the new government.

Assessments include daily written summaries from the students for that lesson's readings and a take-home essay at the end of the unit. Although assessments with multiple choice questions are common among the class's other units, such questions will not be in this unit.

The daily written summaries should be about 500 words in length, and should include the major points expressed in the reading assignment. The final essay for the unit must be typed, be about 1,500 words, have sufficient supporting facts, and accurately portray the relationships between the Enlightenment ideas and the founding documents.

## **The Lessons**

*ALL OF THE READING ASSIGNMENTS ARE AVAILABLE ON LINE, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.  
THEIR WEB ADDRESSES ARE IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHY.*

### **Part I** Early Massachusetts Documents and Their Relationships with the Early Settlements.

Mass DOE Frameworks USI.2.B

Students should have read the *Mayflower Compact of 1620* and the *Massachusetts Body of Liberties of 1641*. The Web addresses for both are in the bibliography.

Key questions for discussion:

1. What had the Pilgrims sought in the *Mayflower Compact* that had resembled what most Englishmen already had in 1620?
2. Why was the list of conditions in the *Massachusetts Body of Liberties of 1641* so long and so detailed, and did it cover all of the liberties or fewer of the liberties that they enjoyed in England? What was different about this compared to what they had in England?
3. How similar were these two documents to the founding documents of the United States?

The students may begin to discuss in pairs for three minutes (I have an egg timer for this) their findings. The class resumes its discussion after the three minutes, sharing their findings to everyone. Answers to the questions, similarities and differences among the documents, and key points are recorded on the board.

**Part II** The Influence of Enlightenment Ideas on the Declaration of Independence.

Mass DOE Frameworks USI.3

Students should have read selections from Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws* and re-read the American Declaration of Independence critically to compare the similarities. After an introduction to Laws and some tips on what to look for, students are to break into groups of four to discuss their findings for ten minutes while the teacher roves among the groups checking for understanding. They are to answer the questions below, then return as a class to discuss the findings of the entire class. Their responses are expected to be supported with facts and examples.

Key questions for discussion:

1. How had Montesquieu regarded the rights of the individual in the governments in his Laws?
2. What was the nature of monarchial governments, and how had King George III violated the expectations colonists had for a king?
3. What was a tyrant king or a despot according to Montesquieu?

Read Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*

Book IX, chapter 1 – 5, chapters 12 and 13 (about ten pages)

**Part III** The Influence of the Enlightenment Ideas on the Constitution Regarding

- A. the Distribution of Political Power
- B. the Rights of Individuals
- C. the Rights of States
- D. Slavery

Mass DOE Frameworks USI.7.A-D

Key questions for discussion:

1. How had Montesquieu proposed the power of a republic be divided?
2. Why must the branches of government enjoy independence from one another?
3. What dangers could exist if the executive branch appointed judges and dismissed them at its pleasure?

Read Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*

- |     |                           |                       |
|-----|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| For | A. Distribution of Power: | Book VIII and Book XI |
|     | B. Individual Rights:     | Book XII              |
|     | C. States' Rights:        | Book IX, XI           |
|     | D. Slavery:               | Book XVII,            |

And Read Jean-Jacque Rousseau's *A Social Contract*, Book II, ch.7, Book III, ch. 9  
Please also review the Articles of Confederation and the Bill of Rights (These are in their textbooks and are referred to through the year.)

**Part IV** The Influence of the Enlightenment Ideas on Federalist Papers 1, 9, 10, 39, 51, and 78

Mass DOE Frameworks USI.8

There are copies of each of these six Federalist Papers in the handouts, and they are available on line.

Key questions for a full class discussion, recorded on the class board:

1. In Federalist #1, why is the power of the government related to the nation's prosperity?
2. In Federalist #9, how does Hamilton defend the Constitution from the Anti-Federalists, and why is it that the large size of the new nation is considered to be a strength, a benefit?
3. How are republics and democracies different, what are their advantages, and how close does Madison stay to Montesquieu on this? (see #10 and see *Laws*, Book II)
4. How is the power of the government derived, and why can it involve elected representatives? (see also Rousseau, Books I and II)
5. Compare Federalist #51 to Part III.A above. What does Madison explain the Constitution will do to preserve the independence of the three branches of government, and why must the Legislative branch be the strongest?
6. Why were factions a danger and what could be done about them?
7. How does Hamilton summarize the importance and the independence of the Judiciary, and how closely does he side with Montesquieu?

**Part IV** Summary Discussion and Assignment of the Essay.

This final class for this unit is a summary discussion, a review of the importance of the Enlightenment ideas on the new American government's founding documents. The discussion may broaden to include the Enlightenment's influence on British and French History, including a discussion regarding its influence on the French Declaration of Rights and Man.

Key questions for discussion:

1. Why are these documents important?
2. How closely do we hone to the intentions of the founders today, and how much does it matter if we do remain close to their intentions?

**End Notes**

1. Staloff, Darren. *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006, pages 11 - 13.

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