

Video 3: The Fundamental Ideas and Values of the American Revolution

Featuring Dr. Andrew Shankman, Rutgers University, Department of History

What is a democracy? How are the ideas of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness defined and for who? In [The Fundamental Ideas and Values of the American Revolution](#), Dr. Shankman provides an overview of the “American Political Experiment”, exploring how the notion of democracy was wrestled with during the founding of the United States.

Key Concepts

- Radical change in the concept equality [01:15 – 17:00]
- The “slippery idea,” of equality beyond “ordinary white men.” [17:02 – 28:27]
- The American Revolution is a Political Revolution [28:35 -32:29]

New Jersey Student Learning Standards

Grades 6-8

6.1.8.CivicsDP.3.a: Use primary and secondary sources to assess whether or not the ideals found in the Declaration of Independence were fulfilled for women, African Americans, and Native Americans during this time period.

6.1.8.CivicsHR.3.a: Explain how and why constitutional civil liberties were impacted by acts of government during the Early Republic (i.e., Alien and Sedition Acts).

Grades 9-12

6.1.12.HistoryCA.2.a: Research multiple perspectives to explain the struggle to create an American identity.

6.1.12.CivicsPD.1.a: Use multiple sources to analyze the factors that led to an increase in the political rights and participation in government.

Review Questions

1. James Otis’s pamphlet hailing the British governance system was intended to coalesce thinking about the right for equal representation. How did the Stamp Act in 1765 underscore his intent?

2. As the young Republic realized that the bond to Britain was broken and they now stood on their own, what themes drove the development of their government?
3. How was democracy defined and understood at the time of the Revolution? Is it different than the way you understand it today? Why might that be the case?
4. Dr. Shankman says that the issue of home rule and who would rule at home encapsulates the “fluid and raucous” revolutionary status. How did the citizens of New Jersey grapple with who will rule?
5. How do liberty, freedom, and property intertwine? How can the government support this dynamic? How can the government interfere?
6. Dr. Shankman talks about the “slippery idea” of equal representation. How does the new American government apply the idea differently when considering “ordinary white men” who are small property owners, white women with no right to own property in their name, and enslaved people with no rights?
7. What does Dr. Shankman mean when he says we need to celebrate the bravery and confront the fears?

Activities

1. Using a [timeline of events leading up to the American Revolution](#), note points where the colonists expressed their desire for representation. How many generations pursued this effort? What was the British government’s response? How long did it take for the American colonists to take aggressive action? How long did it take for the U.S. to establish a functional government?
2. Consider an alternate reality where Britain got economic gains while maintaining American colonists’ loyalty. What did Britain do differently? How might this relationship be mutually beneficial to Britain and the American colonies? How might this alternate history change international relations today?
3. Research current events regarding an issue that considers the concept of equal representation in the United States. Explore what the issue is and consider how it is influenced by issues like state vs. federal government or minority vs. majority rule. How do these issues today reflect the fundamental values of equal representation that have been

debated since the founding of the U.S.?

4. How are all voices heard? What are the forms of communication that have been used to influence opinion on issues in the U.S. historically? Compare and contrast a 21st-century issue with a similar issue from the 20th, 19th, or 18th-century America. Using different forms of communication, how are those not part of the majority able to sway the political will of the many or the “demos”? How does democracy survive when pulled by the extremes of the right and left?

Resources

“Events Leading to the American Revolution” (PDF)

<https://www.cusd80.com/cms/lib6/AZ01001175/Centricity/Domain/713/Events%20Leading%20to%20Am%20Rev.pdf>

“Big Idea 5: Opposition to Independence.” Part of the *Season of Independence* series at the Museum of the American Revolution.

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/big-idea-5-opposition-to-independence>

Ciara Nugent. “What British People in 1776 Really Thought of American Independence.” *Time*, Jul 2018. <https://time.com/5326345/british-american-revolution-1776/>

Amanda Onion. “How the Great Compromise and the Electoral College Affects Politics Today.” *History*. Mar 2019.

<https://www.history.com/news/how-the-great-compromise-affects-politics-today>

Saskia Brechenmacher. “Tackling Women’s Underrepresentation in U.S. Politics: Comparative Perspectives From Europe.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Feb 2018.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/20/tackling-women-s-underrepresentation-in-u.s.-politics-comparative-perspectives-from-europe-pub-75315>

Jean Chung. “Voting Rights in the Era of Mass Incarceration: A Primer.” The Sentencing Project. Jul 2021.

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/felony-disenfranchisement-a-primer/>