

# THE FUNDAMENTAL IDEALS UNDERLINING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE RATIFICATION OF US CONSTITUTION

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## ABSTRACT

*The American Revolution was a pioneering episode in the history of the world, not merely because it led to a change in government, but because it was a revolution in terms of principles and practices of government. This revolution and the ideals that influenced the ratification of the US Constitution subsequently was heavily influenced by the ideas and principles that were propagated by certain 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophes and political thinkers whose works transformed the nature of government and governance. This paper is an attempt to look into the ideals that were espoused by these philosophes and thinkers, whose works and ideas influenced not just the revolution and the ratification of constitution in the United States, but also governments and societies thereafter.*

**Keywords:** American revolution, philosophes, US constitution.

## INTRODUCTION

The American Revolution (1763-1787) was a seminal and pioneering episode in the history of the world with far reaching impact. The end of Revolutionary War bought independence to the 13 colonies and the ratification of a new Constitution declared the hitherto Confederation a Republic and formed a stronger union of states. This republican form of government, with all its powers grounded in the consent of the people was practiced nowhere else in 1776. The ideas of liberty and self-government once adopted by the Americans went on to influence revolutions and societies across the globe. In this paper, we shall discuss the ideas espoused in favor of ratification of the US Constitution and the ideals of the American Revolution as underlined and supported by the important 18<sup>th</sup> century *philosophes* (French term for 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment philosophers) and political thinkers.

The essence and significance of the American Revolution is expounded by Mark Philip in his Introduction to Thomas Paine's '*Rights of Man*' wherein he describes how the independence of America, considered merely as a separation from England, would have had little importance had it not been accompanied by revolution in principles and practice of governments. He distinguishes this revolution from the ones that took place formerly by arguing how the latter had nothing in them that interested mankind at large as they extended only to change in individuals and measures and not in principles. He asserts that conquests and tyranny at some early period disposed man of his rights, and now he was recovering them.

Before the ratification of the US Constitution, the thirteen states were bound together in alliance under the 'Articles of Confederation' which was essentially a military alliance between sovereign states used to fight the Revolutionary war. However, by 1787 a national convention was called to revise the 'Articles of Confederation' which saw both Anti-federalist (against ratification) and Federalist (for ratification) strongly defending their stances. Interestingly, while the former quoted Montesquieu to argue in favor of a contracted territory for the Republican government, the latter cited him too to put forward their stance in support of a Union.

## THE FEDERALISTS

### ➤ ALEXANDER HAMILTON

One of the staunchest supporters of Federalist principle was Alexander Hamilton who in *The Federalist*, 9 argued for a strong union as a protection against domestic faction and insurrection. He argued that the proposed Constitution made the state governments a constituent part of national sovereignty instead of abolishing them, and furthermore, allowed them direct representation in the Senate and bestowed on them significant portions of sovereign power.

### ➤ JAMES MADISON

Similarly James Madison in *The Federalist*, 10 went on to elaborate on the above argument by stating that a well-constructed Union helps break and regulate the violence of faction. He deemed that there were two ways of curbing the effects of faction, one by removing its causes, and two, by controlling its effects. He then cites two ways of removing faction: firstly, by curbing liberty which is essential to its existence and secondly, by creating a society that is homogenous in its opinions and interests, which is impractical. However, he argues that liberty is essential to political life and that it is impossible to create a uniform society as long as

there exists economic stratification. Faction, he concludes is in the nature of man, which inclines him to fall into mutual animosities. Therefore the regulation of these differing interests is the task of modern legislation.

Madison infers that the causes of faction cannot be removed and that its can only be regulated by curbing its effects. He argues that if the faction consists of a minority, then by the Republican principle, the majority can defeat its sinister view by the power of ballot. But the scenario changes if the faction consists of a majority driven by common passion. The cure to this concern according to Madison could be found in the Republican form of government which is characterized by delegation of government to a small group of citizens elected by the rest which will be more harmonious to public good than if decided by the people themselves. He argues that larger electorate in a large republic is more preferential over a smaller one as it would act as a check on unworthy candidates from practicing nasty and malicious exercises, and furthermore, it would open up the space for attractive merit and established characters. Moreover, larger electorate in large republic would mean accommodation of diverse interests, opinions, etc. Madison supported the federal constitution by also saying that it was a healthy mix of national as well as local interest coming together.

These ideas of political thinkers like James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and others have had a strong influence in the framing of the US constitution and they went on to become the founding fathers of American Republic. However, the ratification of the new Constitution characterized by these principles was also the product of the American Revolution which was itself affected by certain ideals inspired by the writings of 18th century *philosophes*, who questioned upholders of tradition, authority and status quo. These *philosophes* raised various issues which went on to become the defining principles of American Revolution, and ultimately influenced the basic nature and characteristic marking the new US constitution. Some of the important names that supported the America Revolution are Denis Diderot, Richard Price, Thomas Paine and even Edmund Burke. Firstly it is essential to understand the reason for the support of American Revolution by these scholars.

## PHILOSOPHES WHO INFLUENCED THE IDEALS OF AMERICAN REVOLUTION

### ➤ RICHARD PRICE

Richard Price, the famed supporter of the American and French revolutions spoke of the errors and prejudices one commits in understanding 'love of our country'. He refused to look at one's country as a soul or spot on the earth on which one is born, rather he viewed it as a community of which one is a member wherein people are governed by the same constitution, protected by the same laws and bound together by the same civil polity. Secondly he stated that love for one's country doesn't mean any conviction of its superior value in comparison to other nations, or any particular preference to its laws and constitution, as that would limit patriotism to a small number of people. Thirdly he clearly distinguishes love for one's country from the spirit of ambition, conquests, expansion and rivalry as it leads to enslaving other nations. The latter he feels is driven by personal greed and desires.

Price was of the opinion that upholding of Truth, Virtue and Liberty was the best means of upholding the interest of one's country. He believed that it was essential to spread the ideas of enlightenment amongst the masses in order to educate them about their rights, and tell them how they were created equal in the eyes of the creator, in order to prevent the government from infringing upon their basic rights. Secondly, he vouched for virtue that followed knowledge and called for mutual love and concord while criticizing the entrenched form of religion. Thirdly he spoke of the importance of liberty which he believed was inseparable from knowledge and virtue, and was an essential ingredient for the growth and development of the society. Finally he argued in favor of need for a civil government, which called for the obedience of the citizens in order to uphold and protect all these ideas and to avoid anarchy. He believed that a governor or king was primarily a servant of the people who drew his mandate from them. And due to this mandate, his office needed to be respected by the people.

### ➤ THOMAS PAINE

Similarly, Thomas Paine argued in favor of revolutions in America and France. He believed that the interest of the monarch and his people were united in essence, and that the French revolution was an attack on the despotic principles of French monarchy and not on the king himself. Further more, he strongly believed that human rights originated in Nature and that it could not be bestowed on humans politically using a charter, as that would mean infringing or curtailing their rights as it could be legally revocable. He staunchly opposed the idea of a hereditary government and the notion that wisdom to govern is inherited. Paine was also a strong critic of Edmund Burke and argued against the latter's idea of lawful inheritance of power and

belief that true social stability could be achieved only when political power was vested in the hands of wealthy aristocratic minority.

➤ **EDMUND BURKE**

Edmund Burke had an interesting stance with regard to the revolutions in America and France as he was supportive of the former but was highly critical of the latter. Burke was a conservative who staunchly opposed the French revolution because of its abstract foundations which he believed ignored the complexities of human nature and societies. He believed that unlike the Glorious and American revolutions, the French one was not according rights to all men. For him tradition, private property and 'prejudice' (adherence to value regardless of their rational basis) were important ideas for giving citizens stake in the nation's social order. He argued for a gradual political reform instead of a revolution and believed that the concomitant disorder arising of it would make the army "mutinous and full of faction", subsequently leading to the rise of a charismatic military general who will usurp power and establish dictatorship. This prediction was fulfilled with the rise of Napoleon.

Irrespective of his opposition to revolutions, especially the French, Burke supported the cause of American independence and appealed for peace over civil war. The most important reason why he held this view was because of the nature of the American people themselves, who he believed were defined by their love of freedom. In his plea to the British government, he urged them to avoid any actions that "may bring on the destruction of this Empire." Even Paine who was highly critical of Burke for being 'stickler for monarchy' and for having taken up 'contemptible opinion of man' gave him the credit for supporting the American cause which he believed was because of Burke's belief that Americans were the most enlightened lot.

➤ **DENIS DIDEROT**

Denis Diderot writing on the American Revolution believed that the home grown philosophy of enlightenment, born in Europe, had spread to America and was now being used against itself. He argued that the government owed its origin to the necessity to prevent the injuries that the members had to fear from one another; the role of a guard who keeps watch so that the common work is not disturbed. He espoused that the society came first and that government was only the instrument of the society. So while the society commands, the government served.

Diderot argued that the seed of inequality was sown by nature itself and that although same rights are bestowed on people, everyone is not born equal. So in order to eliminate the disasters that can rise because of this inequity, he argued that an artificial equality is created wherein all members of the society will submit without exception to a single, impartial authority. However, he stated that if this authority became oppressive and despotic, then it was the legitimate exercise of the oppressed to rise against the rule. In case of American Revolution, Diderot questioned the shameful violence of Englishmen who boasted about their own freedom but viciously attacked that of the other. He criticized them for being tyrants. He believed that the sacred love for freedom was written on the hearts of man and that a man who died for this cause should be seen a hero.

Furthermore, while arguing for the French revolution, he talked about various aspects like intolerance, Right to property, Freedom of Expression, legitimacy of the government which then became important part of the American ideals. Diderot strongly pitched for tolerance and argued that any form of intolerance and violence based on religious or civil lines was impious and irreligious. On the aspect of colonization, he critiqued the Old world for unjustly appropriating the land, resources and even people, and unfairly exploiting and enslaving them. He believed that it was hypocrisy on the part of colonizers who preach justice, morality and a holy religion and go to fight war against their own brothers.

On the freedom of expression, Diderot argued that it is one of the most essential rights of humans which enabled them to grow. Any attempt at curbing this would mean stifling the genius of man and inclination towards tyranny. He believed that free opinion enlightened people, and although it did have its drawbacks, the advantages of it were far greater than its shortcomings. And on the legitimacy of the government he argued that it was an essential requirement for maintaining and regulating order in the society, and that a government drew its legitimacy from the people who could withdraw this mandate if the ruler became oppressive.

**CONCLUSION**

To conclude then, one can say that in the light of these writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century *philosophes* and scholars, one sees that much of the ideas and arguments raised by them influenced not just the American Revolution, but also the subsequent ratification of the US constitution. Be it ideas of strong Union marked by republican and federal setup, or the principles of tolerance, freedom of expression, right to property, etc which was discussed by these men of ideas, all of it found its way into the Constitution. This great revolution

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then, which led to the freedom of its people and marked a new era in the history of the New World, was a beckoning light that influenced and charted a new path for revolutions and societies across the world.

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