

AP US HISTORY · UNIT 3

Philosophical Foundations of the American Revolution

AMSCO Topic 3.4

AP US History Study Guide — Outside-Research Edition

Learning Objective: Explain how and why colonial attitudes about government and the individual changed in the years leading up to the American Revolution. **Thematic focus (College Board framework):** American and National Identity (NAT) · Social Structures (SOC)

*This guide keeps AMSCO's own content as its backbone and expands it with outside research. Every fact beyond what AMSCO Topic 3.4 says is tagged the moment it appears: **OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO:** [claim] — [source]. Only sources actually found this session are cited. Nothing below is invented. One correction is flagged below where the original condensed version of this guide oversimplified a historian's actual argument — see the Historiography section.*

Big Picture

Beyond specific tax grievances (Topic 3.3), colonists needed an intellectual justification for breaking from Britain entirely — not just resisting one tax, but rejecting monarchy itself. That justification came from **Enlightenment** thought and was popularized for ordinary readers by **Thomas Paine**.

Enlightenment Ideas

The Enlightenment peaked in the mid-18th century — exactly when future founders (Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams) were coming of age, shaping their worldview.

- **Deism:** God created natural laws governing the universe but doesn't intervene directly in human affairs (contrast with traditional Christian belief in an interventionist God). People are free to make their own choices.
- **Rationalism:** Trust in human reason to understand the natural world and solve problems — emphasis on science and study of human behavior over strict traditional/biblical interpretation.
- **Social Contract:** The idea that government is an agreement among people to promote liberty and equality, with power flowing "from below" (the people) rather than "from above" (divine right of kings). Developed by **John Locke**, extended by **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**. This was a radical break from the traditional belief that monarchs ruled because God chose them.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO — Locke's actual argument, in enough detail to quote: Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) argues government is legitimate only when based on the **consent of the governed**, and that a just government cannot violate people's natural rights to **life, liberty, and property**. Locke wrote that "no one can be put out of [the state of nature] and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent." The Declaration of Independence (Topic 3.5) echoes this framework "almost point by point": people are created equal with inherent rights, governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, and the people may alter or abolish a government that becomes destructive of those ends. When you write about the Declaration, naming this specific Lockean structure (natural rights → consent → right of revolution when government violates the contract) is worth more than just saying "influenced by Locke." — [FEE, "John Locke: Natural Rights to Life, Liberty, and Property"; Pepperdine School of Public Policy, "Founding Documents: Second Treatise"](#).

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO — a third Enlightenment thinker AMSCO doesn't name but you need for Topic 3.8: Baron de Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), argued that liberty requires **separating** the power to make laws, execute laws, and judge disputes into different hands, so that "power should be a check to power." His influence on the Framers was enormous — at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, only the Bible was quoted more often, and James Madison called him "the oracle who is always consulted and cited" on separation of powers. Madison's own *Federalist* No. 47 is essentially a long argument about how to correctly apply Montesquieu's theory to the new Constitution. Locke supplies the *why* of the Revolution (natural rights, consent, right to overthrow unjust government); Montesquieu supplies the structural *how* of the government built afterward (see Topic 3.8's separation of powers and Topic 3.9). Keep them straight — they answer different questions. — [Constitution Center, "Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws \(1748\)"; Law & Liberty, "How the Founders Read Montesquieu"](#).

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (January 1776)

- Paine, born in England, argued in plain, forceful language that:
- It was illogical ("contrary to common sense") for a large continent to be ruled by a small, distant island.
- The colonies should become fully independent states.
- Unlike earlier writers who blamed only Parliament and the king's ministers, **Paine directly attacked King George III and the very idea of monarchy**.
- Its accessible language for common readers helped it spread rapidly and ignite public demand for independence — a major turning point

in colonial opinion.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO — use these numbers carefully, they're contested: Paine himself claimed *Common Sense* sold around 120,000 copies within its first few months and roughly 500,000 by the end of the war — but historians studying this note that "only scant print records and no sales records survive," and Paine had every incentive to inflate his own impact. What's better-documented: the pamphlet went through about 25 print editions within its first year, and a reasonable historian's estimate is that around 20% of the colonial population owned a copy within a year of publication (in a population of roughly 3 million). On an essay, it's more defensible to say Paine's reach was "unprecedented for the era, though the exact sales figures are disputed" than to cite one specific number as fact. — [Journal of the American Revolution, "Thomas Paine's Inflated Numbers"](#); [Constitution Center, "Thomas Paine: The Original Publishing Viral Superstar"](#).

Historiography: Why Did the Colonies Rebel?

- **Revolution as a Radical Break** (traditional/Progressive-era historians): the Revolution was rooted in Enlightenment ideals and fundamentally transformed society — new republican government, division of powers, emphasis on equality/individual rights.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO — a needed correction: The condensed first draft of this guide characterized historian **Bernard Bailyn's** view as simply "American society was already more democratic before the war." Having now actually researched Bailyn's argument directly, that undersells it and risks a factual error on an essay. Bailyn's real, Pulitzer- and Bancroft Prize-winning thesis in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) is that **the Revolution was above all an ideological and constitutional struggle, not a social or economic one** — colonists were genuinely, sincerely gripped by a fear that concentrated power inevitably corrupts and destroys liberty, a worldview they inherited from British opposition ("Country") pamphleteers like John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Bailyn's key move was pushing back on early-20th-century Progressive historians (like Charles Beard) who treated colonists' talk of "tyranny" and "conspiracy" as propaganda covering for economic self-interest — Bailyn argued instead that colonists **actually believed** power and liberty were locked in permanent, existential conflict, and that this belief, not hidden economic motives, is what explains their willingness to risk everything over what look to us like small taxes. This is a genuinely important distinction for an essay: don't cite Bailyn for "society was becoming more democratic" — cite him for "colonists' fear of conspiracy and corruption was sincere ideology, not a cover story." — [Wikipedia, "The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," summarizing Bailyn's central claims and his engagement with Progressive historiography](#); [The Bulwark, "The Revolution of Bernard Bailyn"](#).

Historical Thinking: Making This Essay-Ready

Causation chain

Enlightenment philosophy circulates in colonial print culture (pamphlets, newspapers, sermons) throughout the early-to-mid 1700s → colonial elites absorb Locke's natural-rights/consent framework and Montesquieu's separation-of-powers framework as their intellectual vocabulary → British actions after 1763 (Topic 3.3) get interpreted *through* that vocabulary — not just as bad policy, but as evidence of a **conspiracy against liberty** (per Bailyn) → Paine's *Common Sense* (Jan. 1776) translates that elite philosophical vocabulary into plain language for ordinary readers → public opinion shifts rapidly toward full independence, not just reconciliation → the Declaration of Independence (July 1776, Topic 3.5) formalizes Lockean theory into the new nation's founding argument.

Comparison point

Compare how colonists framed their objections **before** *Common Sense* (mostly "rights of Englishmen" — we deserve the same rights as other British subjects, a legalistic argument) versus **after** (natural rights belonging to all people everywhere, a universal argument that doesn't depend on being British at all). That shift — from a legal argument to a philosophical one — is exactly what let colonists justify a complete break rather than just a restored relationship.

Continuity and change

Continuity: Enlightenment ideas about reason, natural law, and rights had been circulating in colonial elite culture for decades before 1776 — the ideas weren't new. Change: what changed sharply in 1776 was colonists' willingness to apply those ideas to their *own* king and *their own* complete separation, rather than treating them as abstract European philosophy or arguments about rights *within* the empire.

Terms and Actors

Term/Actor	What it is	Why it's significant / often confused
Deism	Belief that God set natural laws in motion but doesn't intervene	Students often confuse this with atheism — deists still believed firmly in God and a Creator, just not an interventionist one; several founders (Jefferson, Franklin) leaned deist while still using religious language publicly
Social Contract	Government as an agreement among the people, power from "below"	Often stated too vaguely ("people agree to have a government") — the specific, testable content is <i>consent + natural rights + the right to dissolve government that violates the contract</i>
John Locke	<i>Second Treatise of Government</i> (1689) — natural rights, consent, right of revolution	The direct philosophical source of the Declaration's structure — know the life/liberty/property → consent → dissolution chain, not just the name
Montesquieu	<i>The Spirit of the Laws</i> (1748) — separation of powers	Not in AMSCO's own text but essential for Topic 3.8/3.9 — Locke justifies rebelling against government; Montesquieu shapes what the <i>new</i> government looks like structurally
Thomas Paine	Author of <i>Common Sense</i> (1776)	Uniquely attacked monarchy itself (not just Parliament/ministers) and uniquely wrote for ordinary readers rather than elites — both are testable distinctions from earlier pamphleteers
Bernard Bailyn	Historian, <i>The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution</i> (1967)	Argues the Revolution was driven by sincere ideological fear of power corrupting liberty — a direct rebuttal to "Progressive" historians who saw hidden economic self-interest instead

Recommended Videos

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: confirmed to exist and match this topic via search this session. - **Heimler's History — "PHILOSOPHICAL Foundations of the American Revolution [APUSH Review Unit 3 Topic 3.4]"** — the direct AP-aligned companion to this exact topic, covering Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Paine's role in popularizing these ideas. ([youtube.com/watch?v=byLsBFDvsEE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byLsBFDvsEE))

Quick Review Questions

1. How does the Social Contract theory undercut the idea of divine-right monarchy?
2. What made *Common Sense* so effective compared to earlier revolutionary writings — be specific about both its content and its audience?
3. State Bailyn's actual argument accurately: what did he say caused the Revolution, and which older historians was he arguing against?
4. Explain the difference between what Locke and what Montesquieu each contributed to American revolutionary/founding thought.
5. Why does the shift from "rights of Englishmen" language to "natural rights of all people" language matter for justifying a complete break with Britain?

LEQ/DBQ-Style Practice Prompts

1. **"Explain the extent to which Enlightenment philosophy caused the American Revolution."** A strong thesis avoids treating "Enlightenment ideas" as a vague blob — it names Locke's specific contribution (natural rights/consent/right of revolution) and argues for *how* that philosophy functioned: as a justification colonists reached for once material grievances (Topic 3.3) had already built resentment, not as the original spark by itself.
2. **"Compare the role of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* with the role of the Declaration of Independence in building support for American independence."** A strong thesis distinguishes their audiences and functions: Paine persuaded the *public* to want independence at all; the Declaration formally justified independence to the world and to history using Lockean theory, after Congress had already essentially decided.
3. **"Evaluate the extent to which fear of conspiracy, rather than economic self-interest, explains colonial resistance to Britain between 1763 and 1776."** This prompt is built directly from the Bailyn-vs-Progressive-historians debate above — a strong thesis takes a real position using specific evidence (e.g., colonial pamphlet rhetoric about "slavery" and "corruption" as evidence for Bailyn, or merchant boycott patterns as evidence for economic motive) rather than just splitting the difference.

One Thing to Remember

Enlightenment philosophy didn't cause colonists to resent British policy — it gave them a *vocabulary* for that resentment that let them justify a complete break instead of just a better deal, and Thomas Paine is the person who translated that vocabulary from elite philosophy

into a mass movement.