CHAPTER 1

AMERICAN POLITICAL STORIES

Claiming Rights, Demanding to Be Heard

Hearing-impaired new U.S. citizen Willy Theodore (left), 26, born in Haiti, stands alongside sworn-in citizens in Miami in December 2015. Their stories of immigration are part of the American political story: people claiming their constitutional rights and asking to be counted.
Chapter 1  •  AMERICAN POLITICAL STORIES  ■  3

In my undergraduate Introduction to American Government course here at the University of Minnesota, on the first day of class, I tell my students, “I don’t care what you think,” which does tend to generate some uncomfortable silence. But I mean it. Before things get too out of hand, though, I quickly follow up with, “However, I care very much about how you think. That is what this course is about.”

This book is no different. My hope is that you will use this book to question what everyone tells you that you should know or think, to become more confident in making your own ideas known, and to sharpen your ability to interpret for yourself the political world around you. This book uses stories to help accomplish those goals. These stories are very much a central part of the book’s structure and objectives. In each chapter, you will be presented with stories that illustrate important concepts in the study of American politics. They are meant to make those ideas come to life—to help you understand that American government is not something that exists apart from you. And because they are real stories, in all their messy, complicated glory, they will also encourage you and your classmates to think in ways that are not either/or and to walk in the shoes of people who may be very different from you.

This book, therefore, is going to be difficult at times, although not in the sense of being difficult to read and follow—far from that, I hope. I mean that many of the stories don’t have clear heroines, heroes, or villains. Hardly any of them have tidy endings. In this book, I will quote individuals whose words or ideas some will strongly disagree with, maybe even find objectionable. This book will not offer any one political, theoretical, or academic perspective. There will be no magic wand waved in the final chapter of this book that announces, “Here! We’ve got it!” Welcome to the world of American politics and government.

Read the stories; absorb the nuts-and-bolts facts and concepts that emerge along the way in these chapters. Most importantly, however, connect the two. Use the stories to more deeply understand the complexity of American politics, then and now. Use them to understand the diversity of the voices that are a part of the national conversation. Use the stories to make your own voices stronger, better informed, more politically savvy, and more effective.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By reading this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

1.1 Explain how diverse Americans have been able to use the same political tools to achieve their own distinct visions of good government.

1.2 Define the key elements of American political culture.

1.3 Identify the political, social, and economic events and institutions that gave rise to the American Revolution and reflect upon what was and was not achieved.

1.4 Describe the core features of American political institutions.

1.5 Consider the ways in which the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” draws upon core American ideals.

In this chapter and in the book generally, we raise fundamental questions when we try to define what we mean by a “good government” or a bad one. Whose rights get protected? Whose get restricted? How do these questions get resolved? Who gets to decide? The stories told in this book illustrate how big questions like these are resolved, revisited, and reresolved through politics, the process of influencing the actions and policies of a government. Politics and government are closely connected, but they are not the same thing. Politics describes processes; government describes the rules and institutions that arise from political action and conflict and that structure future political action. Throughout the book, we’ll hear from people who have engaged with those institutions and who have taken part in those processes.

We will begin with two stories: one about a young woman in Nebraska who fought for the right to establish a Christian Bible study group at her school and the other about a group of Kentucky students who claimed their right to establish a gay-straight alliance (GSA). We will then go back in time to the American Revolution and Thomas Jefferson’s drafting of the Declaration of Independence, and conclude by fast-forwarding to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

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**Politics**
the process of influencing the actions of officials and the policies of a nation, state, locality, or community.

**Government**
a system of rules and institutions that defines and shapes the contours of public action.
What could these stories possibly have in common? In them we will witness the efforts of vastly different people who have wrestled with what fundamental rights mean in American democracy and see how they as individuals and groups have tried to answer that question, staking their own claims upon their rights.

AMERICAN STUDENTS CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS

• Explain how diverse Americans have been able to use the same political tools to achieve their own distinct visions of good government.

Bridget Mergens walked into the office of her school principal in Omaha, Nebraska, with a request. She wanted to start a student group—a Christian Bible study club.

“I thought he liked me and I was sure he’d say yes,” Mergens later recounted. As one reporter noted, “Principal James Findley did like her . . . but he didn’t say yes. ‘An informal get-together over lunch at the cafeteria would be fine,’ Findley [recalled] saying, ‘but a school-sponsored club? Don’t ask me that, Bridget, because I have a problem with that.’”

Mergens’s high school sponsored many other extracurricular clubs, including a photography club and a scuba diving club. Was her proposal fundamentally different from these sanctioned student groups? This became a question with which her principal and her local school board had to wrestle, and they ultimately denied her request. To Mergens, the school board’s arguments were fundamentally flawed.

The legal basis of Mergens’s claim was a national law, the Equal Access Act (EAA), which was passed in 1984. The law’s primary intent is to restrict the ability of public high schools to exclude faith-based religious extracurricular clubs. The act states, “It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school which receives Federal financial assistance . . . to deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting . . . on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings.”

In 1981, prior to the act’s passage, the U.S. Supreme Court had already affirmed these rights for students at public colleges and universities, but it had not yet done so for those in public high schools. As Mergens’s case proceeded, it was far from certain that the Court would now affirm those same rights for high school students. The reason was the potential “impressionability of high school” students compared to those in college and beyond. Would high school students be mature enough to distinguish between their school’s efforts to provide an open forum for voices and the possibility that the school itself endorsed the club members’ beliefs?

In June 1990, five years after Bridget Mergens tried to start the Bible club, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor. The Court upheld high school students’ rights to the same access for their faith-based extracurricular clubs as that granted to other student groups. It also upheld the constitutionality of the EAA. In her majority opinion in Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens, Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote, “There is a crucial difference between government and private speech endorsing religion, and, as Congress recognized in passing the Act, high school students are mature enough and are likely to understand that a school does not endorse or support student speech that it merely permits on a nondiscriminatory basis.”

Liz Loverde, a sophomore at Wantagh High School in Long Island, New York, in 2014. Loverde successfully pressured her school to allow a Christian Bible study club, thus following in the footsteps of others, such as Bridget Mergens, in claiming rights under the Equal Access Act (EAA).
To some, Mergens’s efforts harkened back to the civil rights movement, in which African Americans claimed their own rights. The director of the Christian-based National Legal Foundation said so explicitly: “Just as officials in the 1950s shut the doors of the schoolhouse to black children, some school officials of the 1980s have attempted to keep out Christians who want to form a Bible club. Such arbitrary censorship is anti-religious discrimination, pure and simple.”

To others, including some of the members of the Supreme Court, the worry was more about the limits of Mergens’s claims on her rights. Who else might make a claim based upon her efforts? Justice Anthony Kennedy raised a concern about the constitutionality of the EAA: that other students with other voices might also use the act to gain access for their student clubs, even if some of their issues of interest might make school administrators uncomfortable. The free speech provisions of the EAA might also guarantee access for student groups with much more controversial agendas. It was this possibility that especially worried school administrators. Reflecting back upon his decision to deny Mergens’s request and the Supreme Court’s ruling, Omaha principal James Findley recounted, “I didn’t have a concern about the five or six kids having a Bible study club. I was concerned about what and who it opens the doors to. I’ve had students say they’ll start a Satanist club or a skinheads group.”

As it turned out, other groups of high school students did test the system, but perhaps not in the ways that Congress intended when it passed the EAA in the first place or in the ways that Principal Findley or members of the Supreme Court worried about. These groups were not Satanists or skinheads. One was a collection of young people in Boyd County, Kentucky, who wanted to start a GSA. In 2002, they circulated a petition declaring their intent. Driving the formation of GSAs was the desire not only to create solidarity between high school students with diverse sexual identities but also to provide a safe space for students who had not yet chosen to make public their own sexual identities, perhaps because of the potential for harassment by their fellow students.

School officials turned down the students’ request to form the GSA. Of twenty-one student group applications, theirs was the only one denied. Requests from groups such as the Future Business Leaders of America and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes were approved. The students then contacted the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for help. One month after the ACLU sent a letter to the school board in which it referred to the EAA, the board reversed itself and approved the formation of the GSA.

But that didn’t fully settle the case. Back at Boyd County High, GSA club founders’ fears of harassment turned out to be valid. According to testimony from the school’s principal, at the first official meeting of the GSA, a crowd “directly confronted the GSA supporters with facial expressions, hand gestures . . . some very uncivil body language . . . people were using loud voices and angry voices.” Two days later, a group of students protesting outside the school “shouted at [GSA] students as they arrived, ‘We don’t want something like that in our school.’”

In an emergency meeting held in December, the school board, following the recommendation of the district superintendent, decided to “ban all noncurricular clubs for the remainder of the 2002–03 school year.” After the decision, members of the GSA stopped using school facilities to meet, but other groups, including the school’s drama and Bible clubs, continued to use the high school’s facilities. The members of the GSA went to court.

Their case did not make it to the Supreme Court; it did not have to. In 2004, the ACLU announced a settlement with the Boyd County public schools and claimed victory: “The settlement requires that the district treat all student clubs equally and conduct an anti-harassment training for all district staff as well as all students in high school and middle school.”

Decades after the Mergens and Boyd County Supreme Court cases, students from Miami Coral Park Senior High’s Gay Straight Alliance march with a banner at a pride festival in Miami Beach, Florida, in April 2017.
The GSA was not the first or the only case brought by student groups focused on challenging discrimination based on a student’s sexual identity, but the efforts of these students highlight the ways in which individuals have used the political tools available to them to secure their own rights. In filing her lawsuit and pursuing her claims all the way to the Supreme Court, Bridget Mergens had help from the National Legal Foundation, a Christian public interest law firm.\(^{15}\) The Boyd County High GSA had the help of the ACLU. While Mergens and the members of the Boyd County High GSA differed in the particular rights they asserted, they both staked their claims on the same federal law, the EAA. With help, they harnessed the power of the American judicial system to realize their goals.

Both groups’ efforts were undertaken with knowledge of the complicated ways in which laws and policies are enacted in the United States and a strategic understanding of the political process. In this book, we will consider those dynamics in detail. We will also dive into the stories of many other individuals and groups who have sought to claim their rights and reshape the laws of the land. In a very deep sense, however, whether or not any of the others whose stories you will read “won” or “lost” is not the most important consideration. By adding their voices to the American conversation, they mattered.

The EAA is just one of many political instruments that individuals have used to claim their rights. Underpinning all of these instruments are the political ideals drawn from thinkers throughout history, expressed in the Declaration of Independence and affirmed as rights by the Framers of the Constitution of the United States. These rights form the basis for the story of this evolving thing we call American democracy, whether or not the Framers fully envisioned how others would use their ideas and the institutions that they created. These efforts are central to the subjects and approach of this chapter and of this book.

### WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?

1. Why have high schools, colleges, and universities struggled with the expression of student voices in cases as diverse as those involving Christian Bible study clubs and gay-straight alliances (GSAs)?
2. How did Bridget Mergens and the members of the Boyd County High GSA make use of the same law, the Equal Access Act (EAA), to claim their rights?
3. What other rights might students in high schools, colleges, and universities claim?

**Answer Key:**
1. Students might reflect upon the rights of all students to have their voices made present in their educational institutions as well as on concerns of school officials that groups might form promoting unpopular, or even hateful, ideas;
2. Answers should focus on fundamental ideas such as freedom of expression;
3. Answers will vary and might focus on speech, safety, or many other areas.

### AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE IS BUILT ON A SET OF SHARED IDEAS

- Define the key elements of American political culture.

When they asserted their rights, Bridget Mergens and members of the Boyd County High GSA did so on the basis of a handful of ideas that form the foundation of the American Republic itself. Indeed, these ideas were affirmed in the Declaration of Independence in 1776, making them part of the country’s basic DNA:

> “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

These were revolutionary ideas, but they were not original ones. They weren’t supposed to be.

In drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson and his coauthors drew upon a set of ideas about liberty and government that were widely known in the colonies and Great Britain—ideas Jefferson knew needed to be persuasive and compelling enough to successfully launch a revolution. From
the histories and philosophical works of ancient Greece and Rome, they borrowed the idea of democracy (from the Greek *demos*, meaning “people,” and *kratos*, or “power”), whereby power is held by the people.

They borrowed from English Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, who had argued against the divine, or God-given, right of kings to rule with absolute power. Locke claimed that people are born with natural rights that kings cannot give or take away. A legitimate government, to Locke, is one that involves a social contract, in which people give to their governments the ability to rule over them to ensure an orderly and functioning society. If a government breaks that social contract by violating people’s natural rights, then the people have the right to replace that unjust government with a just one.

From the French Enlightenment, Jefferson and his colleagues drew on the works of Baron de Montesquieu, who gave an institutional form to the ideas of natural rights and the social contract in proposing that power in government should be divided between different branches so that no one branch could become too powerful. Jefferson also drew upon Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume. Given the historical tendency of leaders to abuse political power, Hume believed a just government should be carefully designed and the lessons of science and history carefully applied to its structure to keep the greedy and ambitious from using political power to their own advantage. In applying scientific principals from studies of the natural world to human political action and interaction, Hume and others like him made major contributions to the modern study of political science.

Later in the chapter we will see how those ideas gave rise to a revolution and helped form the basis for the institutions of modern government. Those ideas of liberty, equality, rights, happiness, and others also endure in other ways. Today they shape the shared set of beliefs, customs, traditions, and values that define the relationship of Americans to their government and to other American citizens. We call those shared beliefs American political culture.

**EQUALITY IS ABOUT HAVING THE SAME RIGHTS OR STATUS**

Central to all of this—and the first key idea expressed in the Declaration of Independence—is a commitment to equality, to having the same rights and status. This might involve social equality, in which no individuals have an inherently higher social status than others. Unlike Europe, with its nobility and royalty, America was founded on the idea that all individuals could reach the social status that they sought based on their own efforts. Political equality exists when members of a society possess the same rights under the laws of the nation. Finally, economic equality refers to a situation in which wealth is relatively evenly distributed across society. America does not have economic equality. In fact, differences in wealth and incomes are as stark today as they have ever been in the nation’s history. Rather than emphasizing equality of economic outcomes, American political ideas tend to focus on ensuring equality of economic opportunity. (See Figure 1.1.)

These are two very different concepts. For example, think about American public education in high schools. Equality of opportunity would mean that all students have a right to attend equally good public high schools. Equality of outcomes, however, might point to their right to achieve the same graduation rates or test scores. We Americans weigh the differences between opportunity and outcomes all the time when we seek to resolve many important civil rights issues and make choices about domestic public policy options.

**INALIENABLE RIGHTS EXIST ABOVE ANY GOVERNMENT POWERS**

The thinking behind the Declaration of Independence and the government that was eventually based upon it is that some truths and some rights are self-evident. These are called inalienable rights in the sense that they exist before and above any government or its powers. Thomas Jefferson names “life,
liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as among those inherent, self-evident rights. Since they—unlike privileges that a government might grant—may not rightly be taken away by a government, a just system of political rule must be constructed in such a way as to protect rights and their expression. The desire to safeguard individuals’ rights led to the complex structure of American political institutions in the Constitution, which we will explore in the next chapter.

**LIBERTY INVOLVES BOTH FREEDOM FROM INTERFERENCE AND FREEDOM TO PURSUE ONE’S DREAMS**

Another foundational American ideal expressed in the Declaration is a commitment to liberty, to social, political, and economic freedoms. That liberty might involve freedom from interference by a government or a freedom to pursue one’s dreams. The degree to which the government should focus on freedom from or freedom to remains a hotly debated topic in American politics. There is often also a tension between these two visions of liberty. In the case of Bridget Mergens’s Bible study club, the tension between these two freedoms came into sharp relief. Mergens and her fellow students claimed the freedom to explore their faith in an extracurricular club. By allowing the group to meet, however, Omaha public school officials risked violating other students’ freedoms from having a government endorse a particular religious faith, or endorse religious over nonreligious beliefs.
MILLENNIALS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The state of the American dream in the twenty-first century is something that we can study empirically. Words are not the only ways to tell stories, nor are images and videos. Data can tell political stories as well. In this book, we will investigate data—numbers, statistics, and survey results—as well as the stories that political actors and reporters construct around the numbers. Make no mistake, data stories can be and are used for political purposes. In investigating data stories in this book, the goal is twofold: to help you become more capable and confident interpreters of data and to help you gain the skills to critically examine the narratives constructed around data.

We start with what at first glance seems like a very simple data story—one taken from the results of a Harvard University survey of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds conducted in December 2015. In the 2015 Harvard survey, Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine were just about equally split between those who believed that the American dream was still alive (49 percent) and those who did not (48 percent).

What Do You Think?
The authors of the survey report placed these results in context and went into much more detail about other factors. But let’s assume that they did not. What conclusions might you draw from this figure alone? Does it reflect your experience? What other data from this survey would you want to know? If you could break out groups of young adult Americans based upon identities and characteristics, what would you examine?

As it turns out, in the Harvard survey, college graduates (58 percent) were more likely than those who had not graduated or ever enrolled (42 percent) to say the American dream was still alive. Young adult Americans in the survey who said that they were supporters of Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (56 percent) or Republican Party candidate Donald Trump (61 percent) reported that they felt the American dream was dead. What might these results mean for your understanding of the political attitudes of young adult Americans today?

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IS AT THE CORE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

When Thomas Jefferson wrote about "the pursuit of happiness," he was tapping into another core American political value: the belief that individuals should be able to achieve prosperity through hard work, sacrifice, and their own talents. The idea of the American dream has drawn immigrants to the nation’s shores and borders since its founding, and it continues to do so today. Some observers, however, question whether the American dream remains alive and well in an era of such profound economic inequality.

AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE HAS MANY ROOTS

America’s religious traditions have also helped shape American political culture in ways more significant than in many modern democratic governments. Some of the very first British colonies were founded by groups of individuals fleeing persecution for their religious beliefs and
hoping to practice their faiths without interference. While the diversity of religious faiths represented in American society continues to expand, America was, and is, a nation partly defined by religious faith and expression. In this book, we will continue to explore the theme of how a nation founded upon liberty, especially religious liberty, wrestles with decisions about if, or how, to place boundaries on religious expression.

Today, questions about the proper role of religion in the nation endure. What kinds of holiday displays are acceptable for a community to officially sponsor? Would a ban on immigration by members of specific religious faiths be constitutional? (See Figure 1.2 for the religious makeup of the United States today.)

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM FLOWS FROM THE NATION’S HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Finally, when Americans tell stories about themselves, their politics, and their histories, they often refer to the ways in which the nation is different because of the historical patterns of the nation’s development. American exceptionalism refers to these historical and cultural differences, shaped in many ways by the voices of those who have contributed to the national chorus but also by the fact that America was an experiment, starting anew, without the legacy of the European monarchies to constrain its promise. The idea of an exceptional America is not a new one. In 1630, Puritan leader John Winthrop delivered a sermon to a group of immigrants from Britain on board their ship as they waited to land in New England. In it he exhorted, “We must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”

**FIGURE 1.2**

Religion in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated (religious “nones”)</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other faiths, 1.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other world religions, 0.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historically Black Protestant</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox Christian</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?

1. The Declaration of Independence ____ the residents of the rebellious British colonies.
   a. granted fundamental political privileges to
   b. recognized the fundamental rights of
   c. granted colonial women the right to vote along with
d. placed strict limits on the expression of rights of

2. The term *American exceptionalism* refers to _____.
   a. the fact that America is unique in its democratic form of government
   b. America’s inability to protect individual rights
c. the belief that America’s unique history contributed to its special political culture and institutions
d. All of the above

3. American society is characterized by _____.
   a. relative social equality and economic inequality
   b. relative economic equality and social inequality
c. relative social equality and economic equality
d. relative social inequality and economic inequality

4. What are some of the key components of American political culture?

   Answers: 1. b; 2. c; 3. a; 4. Answers should include a discussion of inalienable rights, liberty, religious beliefs, and American exceptionalism.

## POLITICS AND POLITICAL ACTION

### SET THE STAGE FOR REVOLUTION

- Identify the political, social, and economic events and institutions that gave rise to the American Revolution and reflect upon what was and was not achieved.

In April 1607, three British ships made their way up what would later become known as the James River in Virginia. After deciding on a spot far enough up the river to avoid Spanish warships, these individuals created the settlement of Jamestown, the first permanent British settlement in the modern-day United States of America. Over the course of the next 170 years, the turbulent political, economic, and social experiences they faced would shape the conditions that led to their eventual separation from Great Britain and establish the foundations of a set of institutions that continue to shape American today.

### COLONIAL SETTLEMENTS ESTABLISH A PRECEDENT FOR INDEPENDENCE

The colonists who established Jamestown did not set out on their own. They were backed, funded, and supported by the Virginia Company, chartered in 1606 to exploit the resources of North America for the benefit of Great Britain and the company’s investors. They hoped to find gold, harvest forest products, and maybe find a valuable trade route. In terms of the subsequent development of the thirteen British colonies and the free American states that later grew out of them, the initial political and economic structure of the colonies proved to be as important as any other factor. From the beginning, the British colonies in North America were used to doing things for themselves without much oversight or interference from the British government.

In 1619, the Virginia colony developed its own legislative assembly, the House of Burgesses, which was the first elected assembly in colonial America. Each of the other thirteen colonies eventually did the same. These assemblies instilled in their colonies a tradition of self-governance and a resistance to being told what to do by Great Britain, especially by Parliament.

In addition, unlike France and Spain, Great Britain initially lacked a coherent colonial policy. Later, in the face of significant national debts incurred in part to protect its colonies from its European rivals, Great Britain tried to exert more centralized control over what it saw as ungrateful and entitled colonies and get them to pay their fair share of the costs of their own protection. This move likely came too late, however; colonial governments were not about to give up the independence they had enjoyed for so long.
A GLOBAL WAR FORCES CHANGE IN COLONIAL POLICY

The Treaty of Paris in 1763 ended the fourth major military conflict between two global powers, France and Great Britain, in less than seventy-five years. In Europe, this conflict was known as the Seven Years’ War.23 In the American colonies, it was known as the French and Indian War. It was a global war; fighting took place in North America, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the West Indies, and the Philippines and involved most of the European powers of the time, including Great Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, Spain, and Sweden.

The North American part of the war began when members of the Ohio Company, a land speculation company established by a group of wealthy Virginians, pushed Virginia’s claims on Native American lands in the Ohio River Valley into lands claimed by France. In 1754, a young officer named George Washington was sent to the territory to challenge French control and assert colonial claims. After an initial attack, Washington retreated to a hastily constructed fort, called Fort Necessity, in western Pennsylvania. Washington was later forced to surrender to the French but was allowed to withdraw with his surviving men.

Hoping to coordinate alliances with Native American peoples—and to keep them from allying with the French—Great Britain requested that its colonies meet at a conference in Albany, New York, in the summer of 1754. Seven colonies sent representatives there.24 The so-called Albany Congress accomplished very little. However, one of its delegates, Benjamin Franklin, who later became America’s first international celebrity, presented to the Congress a plan for closer coordination between the colonies. The Albany Plan called for a “Plan of Union,” in which colonial legislatures would choose delegates to form an assembly under the leadership of a chief executive appointed by Great Britain.25 This governing body would have power over dealings with Native American peoples and collective self-defense. And, in a premonition of an issue that would return again in debates over governance of the victorious United States, it would have the power to tax the colonies to pay for their collective defense.

Benjamin Franklin’s proposal for a unified legislative body was not adopted by the colonial governments. It was not an idea whose time had come. Great Britain was better off dealing with its North American colonies individually rather than as a potentially powerful unified colonial legislature. For their part, many colonies did not want to give up their own sovereignty, especially when it involved land claims that might make a lucky few colonies (especially Virginia) grow even larger and more powerful than they already were at the expense of the small coastal colonies, such as Rhode Island and Delaware, whose boundaries were constricted by the ocean and those of neighboring colonies.

Benjamin Franklin may not have expected his plan to be adopted. He was a very savvy politician. But his plan did plant the seeds for an American union. Writing four years later, Franklin discussed the “impossibility” of an American union at that time, stating, “When I say such a union is impossible, I mean without the most grievous tyranny and oppression.”26 In the minds of many American revolutionaries, they would get just that.

ECONOMIC CONFLICTS GROW BETWEEN GREAT BRITAIN AND ITS COLONIES

After the Seven Years’ War, Great Britain was the unquestioned European power in North America, in Canada, and in the modern United States east of the Mississippi River. With victory, however, came problems: Great Britain had to now confront increasingly assertive colonies. It had acquired a vast new territory that now had to be administered, defended, and paid for. But money was scarce. War had left Great Britain with a significant amount of debt. With bankruptcy a possibility, the British government fully expected its thirteen colonies to pay for their own costs to the British Crown so as not to make the debt problem even worse.27 (See Figure 1.3.)
Following the Seven Years’ War, Britain laid claim to much of the territory once held by the French, thus consolidating its power in the eastern portion of North America. Administering those colonies and finding ways to fund expansion were enormously difficult.

Beginning in 1763, a series of acts and proclamations began to enlarge the scope of Great Britain’s involvement in colonial affairs, producing a backlash from colonists who felt that Great Britain was going too far. To make matters worse, these acts were instituted during an economic depression in the colonies. Colonial legislatures became increasingly resistant to having Parliament interfere in areas of economic life that the colonies, not Great Britain, had been in charge of for decades.

It was an environment full of misunderstanding and anxiety, vulnerable to the efforts of those who would capitalize on these fears to promote their own ideas about relations with Great Britain. This instability was made worse by the inability or refusal of Great Britain to fully understand what was happening in its thirteen North American colonies.

THE IDEA OF INDEPENDENCE IS GIVEN VOICE IN POLITICAL PROPAGANDA

In this uncertain political environment, there were a few who advocated resistance to Great Britain, some who remained loyal to Great Britain, and many more who were undecided and afraid of actions that might lead to a hopeless war against the greatest military power in the world. It was this last group of colonists, the undecided, who found themselves in the crosshairs of a radical few. Those few had a powerful, cheap, and flexible technology on their side. It was called the printing press, and the American radicals used it very well.
From the printing presses came inexpensive and easy-to-produce papers called pamphlets; the printers came to be called pamphleteers. Enough people had access to and the ability to read their products to make the pamphlet a revolutionary technological innovation. The pamphleteers were engaged in political propaganda, “which is simply the attempt to control the actions of people indirectly by controlling their attitudes.”

Their goal was to change public opinion—the distribution of people’s attitudes and preferences on the issues of the day. American pamphleteers were not trying to show their intelligence or literary skill. They were trying to mobilize people in support of their cause. Words and ideas, as the pamphleteers knew well, could also constitute strategic political action.

Of all the American pamphlets, the most widely read was Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet Common Sense, which sold perhaps more than one hundred thousand copies in its first year alone. Common Sense ultimately “had more influence in focusing the spirit of revolt than the writings of all the intellectuals taken together.”

Calling King George III the “royal brute of England,” Paine challenged the legitimacy of the British monarchy, refuted arguments in favor of reconciling differences with Great Britain, and announced that “the period of debate is closed.” He used the dreaded I word, independence, writing that independence from Great Britain was not only possible but sure to come to pass. Drawing on the idea that the American colonists had a unique destiny in the world and in history, Paine called the colonists into action at just the time when many were ready to receive his message.

Words alone, however powerful, were not enough to mobilize the colonists to make a final break from Great Britain. Colonial radicals began a planned strategy of resistance—one that involved propaganda, organization, and occasionally, violence. A common phrase associated with resistance to British tax policy was “No taxation without representation!” While it was used at the time, the phrase did not fully capture the struggle between colonial governments and Great Britain.

American radicals generally did not want to be represented in Parliament in Great Britain. Representatives would have been out of communication with the colonies during debates and consistently outvoted in Parliament even if some arrangement for their representation could be worked out. Instead, the colonists argued that the power of taxation should be held by colonial legislatures, not British Parliament. In many ways, colonial opposition to British policies was conservative. Its adherents wanted to go back to the way things had been prior to the Seven Years’ War, when British colonial policy was more hands-off. Economic and political realities, however, made this an unrealistic goal.

THE SONS OF LIBERTY ATTEMPT TO MOBILIZE COLONISTS AROUND BRITISH TAX POLICIES. In 1765, in response to Great Britain’s tax policies, a group of merchants and workingmen, including Sam Adams, formed the Sons of Liberty. It was a working-class organization, with a potentially much larger appeal to the general public than the revolutionary elites had. That potential made the Sons of Liberty both attractive and scary to the wealthy elites in the revolutionary movement. Their fear was that they might not be able to control the actions of the Sons of Liberty. Through rallies, sermons, protests, and heavy use of the newspapers, the Sons of Liberty tried to mobilize public opinion in support of resistance to Great Britain and its tax policies. They also resorted to violent protest. Acts of mob violence, including rioting and looting, in response to British policy only reinforced elite fear, causing “some conservative American political leaders . . . to worry more about the danger of mobs than they did about British policies.”

The cover of Thomas Paine's pamphlet Common Sense (1776).
The group’s violent actions backfired as a political strategy. Uncommitted colonists looked on the mob violence fearfully, wondering how bad things might get if the crisis were to deepen. In response, radicals changed their strategy. They planned and organized boycotts of British goods, pressuring fellow colonists to comply.

In October 1765, at the invitation of Massachusetts’s colonial legislatures, nine of thirteen colonies sent representatives who met in New York to debate and prepare a colonial response to Britain’s policies. This so-called Stamp Act Congress (named after the Stamp Act, another British tax, that required the purchase of a stamp for nearly everything involved in trade) issued a Declaration of Rights and Grievances, which was, in many ways, quite mild. It affirmed colonial loyalty to the Crown. It did, however, protest against the imposition of taxes without colonial consent. Most importantly, the Stamp Act Congress was an early assembly of representatives across, not just within, the British colonies. In 1766, Great Britain repealed the Stamp Act, mostly due to the pressure of British merchants concerned about its effects on their profits. In fact, the Stamp Act had never been effectively enforced.

THE CRISIS ACCELERATES AS PROTESTS INTENSIFY. Despite continuing tensions, the years following the repeal of the Stamp Act were relatively quiet politically, with radicals losing power and influence and moderates able to keep them in check. Beginning in 1770, however, radical responses to British policies—and British responses to these radical responses—began to shift power and support away from the moderates and into the radical camp.

The exact sequence of events leading up to the Boston Massacre in 1770 is not entirely clear, nor is the exact role of radicals in escalating the situation. It involved a confrontation between a mob of Bostonians and a small group of British soldiers, beginning with taunts and snowballs and ending in the deaths of five American colonials. One of those killed was Crispus Attucks, a young man of African and Native American descent. Sam Adams and other radicals quickly mobilized to use the press to rally support for their cause, describing “the blood of our fellow citizens running like water through King Street.”

THE BOSTON TEA PARTY ADDS FUEL TO THE REVOLUTIONARY FIRE. In 1773, the Boston Sons of Liberty seized upon an even greater crisis to push away the possibility of reconciliation with Great Britain: the Boston Tea Party. It began over a corporate bailout of the East India Tea Company by the government of Great Britain. The British company was nearly bankrupt, and it had large stocks of unsold tea. Though corrupt and poorly managed, the East India Tea Company was no ordinary company. It ruled much of India with its own private army. It could count among its investors some of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Great Britain. It was—in modern terms—too big to fail.

It needed a bailout, and it got one with the Tea Act, passed by Great Britain in 1773. The act gave the East India Tea Company a tax-free monopoly on the tea trade to the colonies. New England merchants, some of whom were profiting handsomely by smuggling tea from Netherlands merchants into the colonies, were not pleased. The Tea Act cut out the middlemen in the colonial tea trade—the New England merchants—who saw “ruin staring them in the face.”

It was the fear of what Great Britain might do next as much as what it actually had done that drove many merchants into the radical camp. In November 1773, the Dartmouth entered Boston Harbor loaded with tea. Two other ships soon followed. With the merchants increasingly on their side, the Sons of Liberty provoked a crisis, dumping the tea from the ships into the harbor.

Not everyone in the American colonies cheered the actions of the radicals. That it was an act of lawlessness worried many. The violence that accompanied the protest seemed to some completely
unjustifiable. The strategic actions of the Boston radicals placed the British government in a very difficult situation. It could not ignore the attack on British property and commerce. Asserting control, however, risked driving moderate colonials into the radical camp.

Parliament, with the support of King George III, clamped down. Hard. In a series of actions in 1774, known in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts, Britain sought to make an example of Massachusetts and its radicals. If Parliament and the Crown thought that this show of resolve—backed, if necessary, by force—would quiet the colonies, they were wrong. Writing many years after the Revolution, John Adams observed this:

The colonies had grown up under constitutions of government so different, there was so great a variety of their religions, they were composed of so many different nations...that to unite them in the same principles in theory and the same system of action, was certainly a very difficult enterprise....Thirteen clocks were made to strike together—a perfection of mechanism which no artist had ever before effected.37

The actions of the British government and the Boston radicals had both helped to synchronize these thirteen clocks.

THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY DENIED THE NATURAL RIGHTS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

The first group of twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 aboard a Dutch ship. Like the native peoples whose lands had been occupied by British settlers, the African peoples who followed this small group came from diverse cultures, nations, and kinship groups. Initially, some were given the status of indentured servants—people who still possessed the ability to pay off their “debts” through labor and achieve their freedom. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whites arrived in numbers from Europe who also carried the status of indentured servitude. As the plantation economies of colonial America developed, however, African slaves and their descendants confronted legal systems designed more and more to strip African captives and their descendants of any legal or political rights or any hope of freedom under that legal order.

By the time Virginia’s government fully codified the status of slaves in the eighteenth century, “no black, free or slave, could own arms, strike a white man, or employ a white servant. Any white person could apprehend any black to demand a certificate of freedom or a pass from the owner giving permission to be off the plantation.” Like the indigenous peoples, slaves and their descendants strove to maintain their ways of life, spiritual and cultural traditions, kinship networks, families, and dignity over the coming centuries.

As colonial America moved toward a revolution based on individual liberty, it was far from an equal society. To many Europeans, the prospect of individual advancement made America more equal than their class-stratified societies, with the exception of the almost feudal southern plantation societies. In New England, working-class colonials had achieved a political status that few of their counterparts in Great Britain could. However, wealth was rapidly accumulating in the hands of a small number of colonial elites.

The revolutionary philosophy of colonial America did not include African Americans—nor women, many religious minorities, or indigenous peoples—in the register of those capable of full citizenship and the rights associated with it. At times, slaves in Virginia and other slaveholding colonies organized and rose up against their oppression. In at least one uprising, slaves seized on the language of the American revolutionaries, shouting “Liberty!” while they rebelled. Armed uprisings by slaves, however, were put down mercilessly with the goal of sending a message to any who would challenge the white order.

The willingness of the majority of white colonial Americans to attack Great Britain for assaults on their liberty while allowing the enslavement of Africans did not go unnoticed by British officials and some white colonists. Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts before the war, questioned how the American revolutionaries could “justify the depriving of more than a hundred thousand Africans of their rights to liberty, and the same pursuit of happiness, and in some degree to their lives, if these rights
are so absolutely inalienable.” Thomas Paine was one of only a relatively small number of white pamphleteers to point out the contradiction of calling for liberty in a society that allowed slavery. In a 1775 newspaper article, he wondered how the colonists could “complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousand in slavery.” This contradiction did not go unnoticed by slaves and free peoples of African descent either. Nor did some of these individuals ignore the potential social and political gains that might be made by pointing out the unfulfilled expression of liberty. In April 1773, a group of African Americans in Massachusetts petitioned the government for a redress of their grievances, drawing “a straight line between their own condition as chattel slaves and the conditions colonists were then objecting to as virtual slavery.” They asked that the same principles be applied to their own condition in colonial America.

“We expect great things,” they wrote, “from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow men to enslave them. . . . As the people of this province seem to be actuated by the principles of equity and justice, we cannot but expect your house will again take our deplorable case into serious consideration, and give us that ample relief which, as men, we have a natural right to.”

In 1776, Lemuel Haynes, a Massachusetts minister, wrote an unpublished pamphlet titled Liberty Further Extended. The son of an African father and a white mother, Haynes became a servant to a religious white farming family in the backcountry of Massachusetts. Haynes educated himself in Puritan theology and on the pamphlets of colonial America. He volunteered as a minuteman in Boston in 1774 and for the Continental Army in 1776. In his pamphlet, Haynes anchored his arguments about the injustice of slavery in the principle of natural rights and the Christian theology with which he and colonials were very familiar:

Liberty is a Jewel which was handed down to man from the cabinet of heaven, and is coeval with his Existence. And as it proceed from the Supreme Legislature of the universe, so it is he which hath a sole right to take away; therefore, he that would take away a man's Liberty assumes a prerogative that Belongs to another, and acts out of his own domain.

REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN, THOUGH EXCLUDED, BUILT INSTITUTIONS OF THEIR OWN

In many ways, women in revolutionary America were legally and politically invisible. In spite of commonalities in their legal standing, however, colonial women as an all-encompassing term fails to capture significant differences in the status, economic class, and religious orientation of the women in question. Women who were slaves, of African descent, or of Native American ancestry struggled against multiple forms of oppression. While sexual and physical abuse was a danger for all colonial women, those who were slaves or indentured servants faced a higher risk. War only heightened these risks; during the conflict, sexual assault was sometimes practiced systematically. In 1776 in Staten Island, New York, and New Jersey, British troops repeatedly raped women in the area.

White women, unless they had acquired property through widowhood, generally had no legal identity or ability to secure their personal and economic rights in a court of law. For those women who did not struggle against the destruction of their families, traditions, and ways of life—either as slaves or members of Native American communities—theirs was a “protective oppression,” designed to keep them out of involvement in government and public life. Because of more restricted educational opportunities and, therefore, lower literacy rates than men, fewer women’s voices were expressed in print. In spite of these challenges, however, many women did speak, write, and act against the restrictions on their own rights and liberties in colonial America.
Because of their general exclusion from public life, women had fewer opportunities to adopt leadership roles in revolutionary America. Religious organizations proved an important exception, as women could act as leaders in them without the same risk of social approbation they would face if acting in the male-dominated political space. Maintaining the boycotts of British goods in the years before revolution also “politicized women and the domestic arena,” especially in the production of substitutes for those goods. The replacement of British textiles, in particular, brought many colonial women together as Daughters of Liberty in spinning events. While these meetings still remained in the “acceptable” realm of home production in the view of the male-dominated white colonial society, they did provide an experience in collective organization—an act of public “joining” that was itself a departure from and challenge to traditional gendered roles.

Efforts to support the Revolutionary War effort led Esther de Berdt Reed, Sarah Franklin Bache (daughter of Benjamin Franklin), and other colonial women to work to create a women’s organization across, not just within, the United States. The Ladies Association was “the biggest domestic fundraising campaign of the war,” in part because women and girls who were not wealthy could still participate.

Reed’s pamphlet, The Sentiments of an American Woman, published in June 1780, laid out the necessity for colonial women to organize to aid the revolutionary cause. The collection, accounting, and delivery of these donations required the development of an organizational and administrative structure. These fund-raising efforts were extremely successful, and this was perhaps the first truly national American women’s organization. Though the members focused on activities considered acceptable for white women in colonial America, the act of organizing and institution building was itself revolutionary.

**INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN NORTH AMERICA CHALLENGED COLONIZATION**

To the millions of indigenous peoples spread out across two continents, the arrival of the European colonists proved utterly destructive to their societies. Throughout this centuries-long process, however, indigenous peoples challenged this disruption, either outright through diplomacy or armed conflict or less visibly by trying to maintain centuries-old traditions in the face of constant threats to them.

The indigenous peoples, called Indians by the Europeans, were not passive inhabitants of a wild paradise. They had already shaped many North American ecologies and landscapes to suit their own diverse social and economic systems, often with significant environmental impact. The British colonists, in turn, attempted to reshape the landscapes of North America to suit their own purposes and lifestyles, which caused profound disruption of the traditional ways of life of the indigenous peoples.

The social, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the native peoples in North America was staggering. At the time of first contact with the European invaders, perhaps a quarter of “all human languages in the world were North American Indian.” Initially, British colonists depended on the adaptive technologies and agricultural advances of the native peoples for their own survival. As the British colonies grew in size and confidence, however, they began to assert their ideas about land ownership more aggressively, provoking resistance by native peoples who had not agreed to such terms. The violence that this clash led to was often horrific, including massacres of entire indigenous local communities and reprisals against individual British colonials.

By the time Thomas Jefferson sat down to draft the Declaration of Independence, the population of the indigenous peoples in the thirteen British colonies had been reduced to a fraction of its level before first contact with the Europeans. Diseases, against which indigenous peoples had little or no immunity, were the largest factor. Death from armed conflict also played a role. However, the disruption in the traditional ways of life of native peoples that arose from European settlement, including the cascading effects of losing their land—which upset agreements and boundaries between them and other native peoples—also had an effect. The impact of British colonization on traditional native ways of life was comprehensive and total. The habitats upon which the indigenous peoples depended were altered...
and depleted. The traditional social and economic systems that had been developed before the British colonists arrived often broke down.

Indigenous peoples, however, did not sit idly by and allow this to happen. They resisted—at times militarily, and often quite successfully. Many indigenous peoples also practiced diplomacy among and between European powers and other native peoples. Sometimes this approach bore fruit, but sometimes it had disastrous outcomes, especially as the European powers were often quite willing to abandon their promises to their “allies” among the native peoples once European objectives had been met. Resistance for most indigenous peoples probably took personal, nonviolent, and largely unrecorded and unremembered forms as they tried to maintain the survival of their families and kinship networks, their spiritual traditions, and their economic and social structures in the presence of powerfully destabilizing forces.56

INDEPENDENCE BECOMES INSTITUTIONALIZED

By the time the delegates to the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in May 1775, the “war of pamphlets and protests was giving way to the war of rifles and cannon.”57 In April, British general Thomas Gage ordered troops to move on Lexington, Massachusetts—to arrest some radical leaders, including Sam Adams—and on Concord, Massachusetts—to seize some weapons. He failed to do both, and the battles of Lexington and Concord, though small, handed the radical pamphleteers the best ammunition they could hope for. They immediately published exaggerated reports of British atrocities against colonial citizens, especially women and children. Individual colonies began to organize or expand colonial militias and organize their manufacturers for war.

Though few could probably have imagined it that May, the Second Continental Congress remained the government of the United States until 1781, when a new American government, one designed by the Congress, took its place.58 The Second Continental Congress was perpetually in crisis, trying to fight a war in the face of what seemed like unending military defeats and inadequate supplies, troops, and hard money. Its capital even had to be moved in the face of advancing British troops.

When the Second Continental Congress first assembled, the colonies were not yet united in the cause of war. A group of wealthy elites with personal, political, or financial ties to Great Britain opposed independence. A second group, the radicals, set their sights on armed conflict with Great Britain. A third group, the moderates, agreed that a show of force might be necessary but only to serve the ultimate end of a negotiated solution. There were other divisions, between slave and nonslaveholding states, large and small colonies, and urban and rural colonists. These divisions would become more important once independence had actually been achieved.

In the early months of 1776, events began to accelerate toward independence. Common Sense had given a clear voice to the cause, and British actions had given ammunition to the radicals. Individual colonies began to pass resolutions authorizing their delegates in Congress (often at the request of those delegates) to move for independence from Great Britain. On June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia offered a motion in Congress declaring “that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”59

Congress was not quite ready to act on the Lee Resolution. The vote was postponed for three weeks to allow for more instructions to arrive from some of the colonies and to coerce reluctant colonies and their delegates on board. In the meantime, a committee was appointed to draft a basic structure for a government in the event of independence. A second committee was charged with trying to secure foreign aid. Another committee, consisting of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston, was charged with writing a declaration, a justification, for American independence. On July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress approved the Lee Resolution, marking, perhaps, the actual date of America’s formal declaration of independence from Great Britain. Two days later, on July 4, Congress approved Thomas Jefferson’s revised Declaration of Independence, which justified its previous actions to the colonies and to the world, though the Congress had modified Jefferson’s original draft.

Of all the changes that members of the Second Continental Congress made to Jefferson’s first draft, none were more significant than the deletion of his charges against the king on the issue of slavery. The
first section of the deleted charges accused the king of violating natural rights by allowing the slave trade to continue. Thomas Jefferson was a slave owner, one of the largest in Virginia. His lifestyle depended on the capture, sale, and oppression of other human beings. The second deleted section, in which Jefferson charged the king with trying to incite slave rebellions in the colonies, spoke directly to the fears of many southern plantation owners. British officials had recently made offers of freedom to colonial slaves who would join the British against the American revolutionaries. Many eventually did.

In the end, Jefferson’s charges against the king on the issue of slavery were deleted, partly due to opposition from southern state delegates. The contradiction—of a new nation announcing its birth on the foundation of freedom while holding hundreds of thousands of people in slavery—remained.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IS STILL UNDER CONSTRUCTION

From the start, the Revolutionary War went poorly for the Americans. Successive defeats, disease, and logistical problems all plagued the colonials and their general, George Washington. By adapting their tactics to suit their strengths—knowledge of the terrain and support among many of the locals—the colonials managed to use hit-and-run tactics to harass Britain and attack its long supply lines. With the help of Britain’s rivals, especially France and its powerful navy, the Americans defeated Great Britain at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783 and ratified by Congress in 1784, secured the independence of the United States of America.

Militarily and politically, the American Revolution wasn’t technically a revolution. King George III was not overthrown; the British Empire remained intact. George would go on to become the longest-reigning British monarch until Queen Victoria in the nineteenth century. The conflict in America is more properly called a secession, in which a group of citizens break off from the larger government to form one of their own. In the backcountry, it was frequently a civil war, with members of the same communities fighting each other, often brutally.

It was, however, very much a revolution of ideas. Though imperfectly and incompletely, the idea of a government based upon natural rights and individual liberty had been given political and institutional form. Later American revolutionaries would undertake their own wars of ideas and political strategies to try to make the government live up to its promises. As part of their efforts, they would build, rebuild, and reshape the political institutions that protect and express Americans’ natural rights in a representative democracy.

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?

1. The Seven Years’ War resulted in a change in British policy that involved _____.
   a. a large transfer of British land claims to France
   b. the decision to be more assertive toward colonists
   c. the immediate granting of independence to the colonies
   d. widespread religious persecution

2. The Albany Plan called for _____.
   a. closer cooperation between colonies
   b. independence from Great Britain
   c. new forms of taxation
   d. trade policy reform

3. Many colonial American elites worried about some of the actions of the Sons of Liberty because they _____.
   a. supported Great Britain and its policies
   b. failed to repeal the Stamp Act
   c. advocated for the rights of indigenous peoples
   d. threatened mob rule

4. Why was opposition to the Stamp Act on the part of residents of the British colonies in North America so strong?

5. What contradictions were inherent in colonialists’ claims to independence on the basis of natural rights?

6. What political institutions did women in revolutionary America help build? Why does this matter?
THE STRUCTURE OF INSTITUTIONS AFFECTS HOW CITIZENS PARTICIPATE

- Describe the core features of American political institutions.

As we have seen in the stories that have already been mentioned, while the actions of people and their ideas matter to American government, the political institutions that structure how citizens may be involved matter as well. To a great extent, institutions determine how conflicts over political power are resolved, and they can also shape the ideas of people acting within them.

In devising a system of government, two basic questions need to be resolved: how much power that government will claim, and how political power will be distributed or withheld. Different forms of governments distribute power in very different ways. Totalitarian governments admit no limitations on their own power or competing centers of political power. Similarly, authoritarian governments suppress the voices of their citizens to maintain a grip on power; however, unlike totalitarian systems, authoritarian systems may have some economic or social institutions not under governmental control that may serve to moderate the government’s power. Governments that admit no external challenge to their claims on power might be monarchies, ruled by royal figures; theocracies, ruled by religious elites; or oligarchies, ruled by a small group of powerful elites. At the other end of the spectrum of power is a direct democracy, in which citizens vote directly on public policies. (See Figure 1.4.)

The United States is none of these extremes. While the nation does have elements of direct democracy—in, for example, local votes to approve or reject public school budgets or property tax increases—the vast
majority of conflicts over power in America are handled through a system of representative democracy, in which voters select representatives who then vote on matters of public policy. In doing so, voters in a representative democracy are confronted with a serious challenge: How can they be sure that their representatives are carrying out their wishes? This is a question that we will examine in some detail in this book.

The number of political institutions in America today is almost too long to list, composed of bodies at the local, state, and national levels. The most important institution in American political life, however, is the U.S. Constitution. This document forms the basis of the nation’s government and, in turn, creates a host of political institutions through which conflicts over political power are resolved. It places textual limits on the power of the national government in order to protect Americans’ fundamental rights. It also constitutes, or creates, a people with its first seven words: “We the People of the United States.”

How does a society structure political institutions in such a way that the social contract is upheld? By ceding some of the expression of their natural rights to a government, Americans have tried to create institutions that ensure an orderly and prosperous society. In doing so, however, they run the risk of creating institutions that oppress instead of uplift. The United States of America is, institutionally and fundamentally, a constitutional republic. In it, Americans elect representatives to make most of the laws and policies in the nation, rather than voting on them directly, which would be unwieldy in a nation of more than 325 million people. In addition, and crucially, limits are placed on the power of government to infringe upon people’s rights in a constituting document that is recognized as the highest and most supreme law of the nation.

The institutions and rules of a government not only structure the politics of a nation but also may serve to structure its economy, or the ways in which goods and services are produced and distributed within a society.

When comparing different economic systems, the key thing to focus on is how much power a government has to regulate the production and distribution of goods and services. In a communist system, a government acting on behalf of all workers in a society controls the means of production and

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**representative democracy**
a political system in which voters select representatives who then vote on matters of public policy.

**constitutional republic**
a form of government in which people vote for elected representatives to make laws and policies and in which limits on the ability of that government to restrict individual rights are placed in a constituting document that is recognized as the highest law of the land.

**economy**
the systems and organizations through which a society produces and distributes goods and services.

**communist system**
a way of structuring economic activity in which a government exerts complete control over the production and distribution of goods and services.

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**FIGURE 1.5**
Types of Economic Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communist Economy</th>
<th>Socialist Economy</th>
<th>Regulated Capitalist Economy</th>
<th>Laissez-Faire Capitalist Economy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete government control over production and distribution of goods and services.</td>
<td>Strong government regulation of private firms that operate production and distribution of goods and services.</td>
<td>Government regulates economy but firms allow a great deal of control over their operations.</td>
<td>No government regulation over the economy; private firms and individuals operate without oversight.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stronger government control  
Stronger private control
distribution. In a socialist system, private firms are allowed to operate but with significant intervention by the government, which may include governmental control of sectors of the economy, in the service of ensuring economic equality. In a capitalist system, private ownership of the means of production and distribution of a society’s resources is emphasized and protected under the laws of that society. Capitalism emphasizes the efficiency of the marketplace in optimally allocating a society’s resources. A completely unregulated capitalist system is called laissez-faire (from the French “let go,” or “let be”) and allows individuals and private firms to operate without regulation or oversight. No representative democracies currently practice laissez-faire capitalism. Instead, even nations like the United States that emphasize private economic action practice regulated capitalism, in which firms are allowed to control much of their own decision making but are also subject to governmental rules and regulations. (See Figure 1.5.)

**WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?**

1. American political decisions are made primarily through _____.
   a. majority rule
   b. the practice of direct democracy
   c. representatives who have been elected by the people to make laws and policies
   d. the executive office

2. In a republic, citizens _____.
   a. have little say in the formation of laws and policies
   b. vote directly on laws and policies
   c. elect representatives who then formulate laws and policies
   d. place their rights in the hands of unelected officials

3. What is the primary difference between capitalist and socialist economic systems?
   a. ___________

**Answer Key:** 1. c; 2. c; 3. Answers should emphasize the role of government in regulating the markets.

**DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.’S “LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL” LINKS THE CHALLENGE AGAINST RACIAL SEGREGATION TO CORE AMERICAN IDEALS**

Consider the ways in which the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” draws upon core American ideals.

As they led about forty protesters from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and his close friend, Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, were dressed for jail. Wearing work shirts and jeans, carrying coats to ward off the cold and damp of Birmingham City Jail, King and Abernathy walked past hundreds of spectators, witnesses, and supporters. Some “sang freedom songs, some knelt in silence.” On the night before the march, King had told the planners and supporters gathered in Room 30 of the Gaston Motel in Birmingham, “I don’t know what will happen. I don’t know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, the two leaders had tried to show calmness and strength. One evening prior to leaving for Birmingham, King had lightened the mood of all present when, looking at Abernathy and knowing well his friend’s habits, he had said, “Let me be sure to get arrested with people who don’t snore.” On the night before the march, King had told the planners and supporters gathered in Room 30 of the Gaston Motel in Birmingham, “I don’t know what will happen. I don’t know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act.”

Born in Atlanta in 1929, King received a doctorate in theology from Boston University and, like his father, joined the Christian clergy. After university, King moved back to the South, even though “there had been offers of jobs in safe northern universities.” Later he became one of the founders and the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization devoted to challenging racial segregation and advocating for civil rights. In its founding statement, the conference’s leaders pointed to the violence against those struggling for racial justice and announced that “we have no moral socialists...
choice, before God, but to delve deeper into the struggle—and to do so with greater reliance on non-violence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing and Christian understanding.”

King, Abernathy, and other civil rights leaders faced a near-constant threat of violence for their opposition to racial segregation, as did many other women and men who took on the white racial order in the American South. King’s own home in Montgomery, Alabama, had been bombed in 1956, though both King and his wife escaped harm. Prior to that act of racial violence, King had also been verbally threatened in an anonymous phone call—a clear attempt to intimidate him. It didn’t work. King, as well as other leaders, members, and supporters of the SCLC, pressed ahead.

That they were marching in Birmingham in 1963 was no accident. The city was a bastion of segregation, and threats of violence to anyone who resisted were pervasive. The protests were designed as acts of civil disobedience in which one defied a law seen as unjust and accepted the consequences of that defiance, as King put it, “openly, lovingly.”

For breaking a prohibition on their marching or protesting, King, Abernathy, and about fifty others were arrested and taken to Birmingham City Jail. King was thrown into solitary confinement—“the hole,” as it was called—with only a cot with metal slats to sleep on. “You will never know the meaning of utter darkness,” he recalled, “until you have lain in such a dungeon.”

WHITE CLERGY MEMBERS URGE MODERATION

The morning after King’s arrest, a copy of an article from the Birmingham News was “slipped in to” his cell. Titled “White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations,” the letter, written by eight white members of the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergies, admonished King and the other leaders of the SCLC to slow down, to stop protesting, to end the strategy of civil disobedience in Birmingham.

Calling the demonstrations “unwise and untimely” and “directed and led in part by outsiders,” the eight clergy members argued that “honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts.” They “commend[ed] the [Birmingham] community as a whole and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations ha[d] been handled.” (However, a photograph taken less than a month later and published in the New York Times showing a young African American man being attacked by a police dog under the direction of a Birmingham police officer led millions of Americans to question claims of police restraint.) In closing, the clergy members urged Birmingham’s “Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations.”

DR. KING’S LETTER AFFIRMS NATURAL RIGHTS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

Writing in the margins of the smuggled newspaper, Martin Luther King Jr. penned a response from jail to the clergymen’s accusations and advice. His notes were smuggled out of the jail, typed up, and eventually published by a group of Quakers as the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Though it did not have the benefit of King’s powerful speaking voice to increase its impact, it is one of the most important documents of the American civil rights movement.
African American activists in the civil rights movement of the 1960s used a variety of strategies to bring about social change, including holding sit-ins in whites-only areas, such as lunch counters and on public transportation, and organizing marches and demonstrations across the South. The white clergy who urged “moderation” said that those types of protests were unwise and argued that protesters should pursue institutional avenues, such as the courts, for change.

This photograph of a student activist being attacked by a police dog in Birmingham, Alabama, appeared on the front page of the New York Times in 1963. President John F. Kennedy is reported to have viewed it and said it sickened him. He also is said to have registered that it would make the United States look bad across the world, as Birmingham was “a dangerous situation for our image abroad.” Shortly afterward, Kennedy delivered his own famous civil rights speech, vindicating Martin Luther King Jr.’s statements in the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

In the letter, King begins by offering his reply as a sincere response to the white clergymen’s concerns, calling them “men of genuine goodwill.” Then he defends his presence in Birmingham professionally, as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. However, he also lays out a much more fundamental basis for his involvement. He declares, “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.”

King defends his and his movement’s tactics on the basis of natural rights, drawing a distinction between just and unjust laws: “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the natural law.” Racial oppression, he asserts, in all of its legal manifestations, is unjust. Individuals, therefore, have the right to break these unjust laws, but, he adds, “One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly.”

In a single sentence, more than three hundred words long, King lists the grievances, the injustices, and the evidence that led to his and many others’ revolutionary acts. In its use of language, logic, and the principles of natural rights, the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” knows no superior as an American revolutionary pamphlet. Politically, one of the most important passages in the letter pointed to the white moderate as a severe obstacle to justice: “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White citizens’ ‘Councilor’ or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

Doyle Brunson, one of the greatest No-Limit Texas Hold’Em poker players of all time, said of his poker strategy, “I want to put my opponent to a decision for all his chips.” The radicals of the American Revolution meant to present the colonial moderates with exactly the same decision. Through their actions—and with help from British reactions to their strategies—the radicals took away the possibility of a comfortable, moderate, middle ground. By creating a crisis and a confrontation, King and his fellow protesters sought to force white moderates to make a choice, to decide if racial segregation and the oppression of African Americans was consistent with the ideals of the United States or not. In their own ways, Bridget Mergens and the members of the Boyd County High Gay-Straight Alliance did the same thing.
A study of American government requires understanding the ideas upon which it is based. It requires an understanding of the ways in which political institutions promote, shape, or hinder the fulfillment of these fundamental ideas. It requires a study of the past and the present. However, and most importantly, a deep study of American government requires that you think, and perhaps act, as a strategic player in the political space, which is rarely, if ever, neat and clean.

Should you choose to act in American politics—should you choose to stake your own claims for your rights—you will want to be well informed, about both your own positions on critical issues and the positions of those with whom you disagree. You will want to have developed your skills in analyzing the words, images, and data that will serve as your tools along the way. And you will need to question. What is American political culture? Is there such a thing? How do the institutions of American government make “good government” more or less likely?

At the beginning of the chapter, I stated that this book would be centered on stories, and it is. But why? How is it useful to begin a book that teaches American government and politics with stories about a high school student trying to start a Christian Bible study club, a group of high school students trying to start a GSA, or the American Revolution and the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. writing his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”? Why read the stories? Why not just skim the definitions for the “important” content? Because the stories and, most importantly, your engagement with them have the potential to capture what definitions and lists might not:

The understanding that American political institutions did not fall out of the sky; they were created through conscious action and contestation, sometimes based upon success, sometimes based upon failure, and sometimes based upon pure chance

The comprehension that in the world of American government and politics, there is rarely, if ever, an either/or solution to major problems but instead a complex interplay among ideals, actions, time, and place
The understanding that the development of American government and politics has always involved the experiences of individuals and groups whose lives were written out of conventional narratives

The realization that people matter, even if they do not succeed

The knowledge that your own voices matter—that your own opinions, thoughtfully constructed and respectfully offered, matter, even if these ideas and opinions may seem to be outside some perception of what you are supposed to think or what others tell you to think

As you read, engage with, and discuss the material in this book and in your courses, there are only two things of which I will try to convince you: People like you matter. And your stories matter as well, even if nobody ever retells them in a book.

The American experiment always was a complicated and incomplete thing. It still is. At its heart, it poses one difficult and basic question: Can a people design and maintain a government that uplifts and energizes its citizens rather than oppresses them? The answer to that question is not up to other people. It is up to you.

**CHAPTER REVIEW**

This chapter’s main ideas are reflected in the Learning Objectives. By reviewing them here, you should be able to remember the key points, know the terms that are central to the topic, and think about the critical issues raised in each section.

1.1 Explain how diverse Americans have been able to use the same political tools to achieve their own distinct visions of good government.

**REMEMBER**
- The American political system is designed so that different individuals and groups of people, regardless of their points of view and backgrounds, are able to access the same political tools, such as federal and state laws and different forms of political action, in order to bring about change.

**KNOW**
- politics (p. 3)
- government (p. 3)

**THINK**
- Americans with very different political goals and perspectives have based their efforts on many of the same fundamental ideas. Why do you think this is possible?

1.2 Define the key elements of American political culture.

**REMEMBER**
- The American political system was founded on a set of shared ideas and values that together are called political culture.
- The most important aspects of American political culture are the commitments to equality, rights, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and religious freedom, and the idea that America is unique in the ways it has developed.
- Those ideas and values define the relationship of Americans to their government and to each other.

**KNOW**
- American dream (p. 9)
- American exceptionalism (p. 10)
- American political culture (p. 7)
- democracy (p. 7)
- economic equality (p. 7)
- inalienable rights (p. 7)
- liberty (p. 8)
- natural rights (p. 7)
- political equality (p. 7)
- political science (p. 7)
- social contract (p. 7)
- social equality (p. 7)

**THINK**
- What are some of the key ideas that define American political culture?
- To what extent do your experiences inform you of the degree to which these ideas have been realized?
1.3 Identify the political, social, and economic events and institutions that gave rise to the American Revolution and reflect upon what was and was not achieved.

**REMEMBER**
- The Declaration of Independence was drafted primarily by Thomas Jefferson in connection with the Second Continental Congress in 1776.
- Jefferson and his colleagues in the Continental Congress made a series of strategic decisions in incorporating key ideas from history into a document that successfully laid out the justification for independence.
- Colonial economies depended upon slavery and slave labor. Slaves, the descendants of slaves, and native peoples were not extended rights under the Declaration of Independence.
- The Declaration was shaped by the politics and historical context of American colonies trying to assert themselves in the face of tyranny.
- The political, social, and economic ideas that circulated in political pamphlets, especially Paine’s *Common Sense*, contributed greatly to the rationale for independence and revolution in the face of increasing British taxation.
- Women played a role in the economy and affairs of the colonies but were not extended full rights.

**KNOW**
- Albany Plan (p. 12)
- Daughters of Liberty (p. 18)
- Intolerable Acts (p. 16)
- political propaganda (p. 14)
- Second Continental Congress (p. 19)
- Seven Years’ War (p. 12)
- Sons of Liberty (p. 14)

**THINK**
- What were the main ideas behind the Declaration of Independence?
- Do you think the ideals in the Declaration have been achieved in today’s United States?

1.4 Describe the core features of American political institutions.

**REMEMBER**
- In the American model of representative democracy, the forms our political institutions take affect how people are represented.
- The institutional structure of the United States is that of a constitutional republic, in which the people elect representatives to make most of the laws and policies in the nation rather than voting on them directly.
- Institutions can both protect and restrict rights, and people may use and change them to protect their own rights or those of others.
- America’s political institutions also structure the country’s economy.

**KNOW**
- capitalist system (p. 23)
- communist system (p. 22)
- constitutional republic (p. 22)
- direct democracy (p. 21)
- economy (p. 22)
- political institutions (p. 21)
- representative democracy (p. 22)
- socialist system (p. 23)

**THINK**
- What form of government does America have?
- How are political decisions in America made?

1.5 Consider the ways in which the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” draws upon core American ideals.

**REMEMBER**
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), one of the most important documents of the civil rights movement, directly echoes the claims for rights made by Thomas Jefferson over 150 years prior.
- Even today, claims for natural rights—rights that cannot be denied by governments—must be made.

**THINK**
- In what ways is King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” similar to the Declaration of Independence?
- In what ways do they differ?