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. As you will quickly realize, 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 big and 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 force 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 are not always happy or optimistic. Most 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 and contestation of American politics, then and now. Use them to understand the diversity of the voices that have been a part of the national conversation and why some voices have been and continue to be excluded from the dominant conversations in American society. Use the stories to make your own voices stronger, better informed, more politically savvy, and more effective.

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? Well, in a sense, these questions do not get resolved, at least not all at once and for all time. The stories told in this book illustrate how big questions like these are resolved, revisited, and re-resolved 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, the other about a group of Kentucky students who claimed their rights to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance. 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.”
What could all of 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.

By connecting to those stories about the foundations of American government, you will be able to:

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 Examine the ways in which natural rights and the theory of the social contract helped to shape the ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence
1.4 Identify the factors that gave rise to the American Revolution and discuss the war’s legacy, both in what was and what was not achieved
1.5 Describe the core features of American political institutions
1.6 Compare Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to Thomas Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence in terms of their ideas and the political strategies of their authors

**AMERICAN STUDENTS CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS**

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.1 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.’”2

Mergens’s high school sponsored many other extracurricular clubs, including a chess club, 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 of 1984 (EAA), passed during the administration of Republican president Ronald Reagan. Though there are some details in the EAA about the ways in which schools must treat clubs in general, 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 United States 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. In that decision, the Court ruled in favor of a student religious group that had been denied access to facilities at the University of Missouri at Kansas City even though other, non faith-based groups had been granted the use of university facilities.4

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 “impres

sionability of high school” students, compared to those in college and beyond.5 Would high school students be mature enough to distinguish between their school’s efforts to pro

vide an open and vibrant forum for voices and the possibility that the school itself endorsed the club members’ beliefs? As one observer wondered, “How mature are high school

students? Do they feel pressured to join school-sponsored clubs, or will they feel ostracized if their views differ?”6

In June 1990, five years after Bridget Mergens tried to start the Bible club, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor. By this point, she was Bridget Mergens Mayhew, married and

with a young child. The Court upheld high school students’ rights to have 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.”7

To some, Mergens Mayhew’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.”8

To others, including some of the members of the Supreme Court, the worry was more about the limits of Mergens Mayhew’s claims on her rights. Who else might make a claim based upon her efforts? In his contribution to the Court’s decision in Board v. Mergens, Justice Anthony Kennedy added another 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.9 While the EAA opened the doors for student groups such as Bible study groups, its free speech provisions 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 Mayhew’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 Gay-Straight Alliance (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 of harassment by their fellow students.

School officials turned down the student’s 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 Equal Access Act, 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 following the announcement of the group’s approval, 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.” The GSA’s 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. The Boyd County High GSA had the help of the ACLU. Posting to its Web site in December 2002 while it considered legal action on the GSA’s behalf, the ACLU attacked the decision of the Boyd County school board to shut down all student clubs rather than allowing members of the GSA to meet. In doing so, attorneys from the ACLU referred back to the civil rights movement, just as Mergens’s attorneys had done in claiming her right to start a Bible study club, saying, “This decision is frightfully similar to the days when many cities chose to shut down public swimming pools rather than let African Americans use them.”

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.

While Bridget Mergens and the members of the Boyd County High GSA differed in the particular rights of freedom and speech that they asserted, they shared much in common. They both staked their claims on the same federal law, the Equal Access Act. With help, they harnessed the power of the American judicial system to realize their goals. Their efforts demonstrated that people really do matter in the development of American politics.

The Equal Access Act 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?

2. How did Bridget Mergens and the members of the Boyd County High GSA make use of the same law, the Equal Access Act, 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 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.
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 first 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.” In this passage, the author of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson, captured many of the ideas that shape American political culture even today. Americans have long argued about what these words mean, and for good reason, as the American experiment continues to be shaped by the people who try to bring its promises to fruition. As they do so, they draw upon the ideas that helped to define it. As with all things that people build, American political culture is constructed from individual building blocks, which we need to explore in more detail.

**Equality**

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.

These are two very different concepts. For example, think about American public education in high schools. Equality of opportunity would point to a right to attend equally good public high schools. Equality of outcomes, however, might point to the right to achieve the same educational success, in, say, graduation rates or test scores. 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**

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.
The thinking behind the Declaration of Independence is that some rights 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**

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 the public school Bible study club with which we began this chapter, the tension between these two freedoms came into sharp relief. Bridget Mergens and her fellow students claimed the freedom to explore their faith in an extracurricular club. By allowing the group, 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.

**The Pursuit of Happiness: 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.

Children of the Aldabbi family in the Kentucky Science Center in 2015, after a four-year trek from the violence, chaos, and civil war in Syria, settled in the United States with the help of the Kentucky Refugee Ministries. At its most basic level, the American dream promises hope and opportunity for all.

Jabin Botsford/Washington Post/Getty Images
The state of the American dream in the twenty-first century is more than a topic for experts to weigh in on, whether on talk shows, through social media, on political comedy shows, or via any of the other seemingly endless streams of information with which we are bombarded. It is also something that we can study. Words are not the only ways to tell stories, nor are images and videos. Data can and do 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 of 2015.19

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?

To be fair, 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 in 2016?

Religious Beliefs

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.

In 2016, questions about the proper role of religion in the nation endured. What kinds of holiday displays are acceptable for a community to officially sponsor? Would a ban on immigration by members of specific religious faiths—one that had been called for by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump—be constitutional?

America the Different?

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. The term 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 onboard their ship as they waited to land in what would later be known as 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.”

Is there such a thing as a shared American political culture in the twenty-first century? In 2016, especially as the presidential campaign unfolded, it was not too far-fetched to wonder if it did still exist. We will explore the deep divisions in American politics today throughout this book and encounter the often harsh and divisive language employed by candidates, citizens, and other political activists. American political culture, however, is only part of the framework of American politics. The questions and debates are not only about how differences are resolved but also about what those differences are.

American Political Ideologies

Americans may not always agree on a set of foundational concepts that constitute a shared political culture, and they also may disagree sharply about what the desired outcomes of the political processes should be. A person or group’s political ideology is a set of beliefs about what should happen as the result of the process of governance. Individuals’ political ideologies may differ on, for example, the degree to which government should regulate economic activity, how deeply government should be involved in individuals’ decisions in their private lives, how much government should act to ensure equality of opportunity, or an almost endless list of other policies and issues. As with questions about religious faith, in 2016 debates based upon competing American political ideologies endured, with some observers and scholars arguing that the nation had become deeply divided. In this book, we will explore these debates and discussions in detail.

DRAFTING THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Affirming and Demanding Fundamental Rights

For two and a half weeks in June of 1776, Thomas Jefferson “closeted himself in his rooms in the boarding house” at the corner of Seventh and Market Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was writing a draft of the Declaration of Independence. Sitting at the
“little portable writing table built to his own design,” Jefferson, using quill and ink, penned the first draft of one of the most important statements in American political history.23 Most of the document was a list of accusations—charges of bad government. Though the indictments were against George III, king of Great Britain, the document’s real audience was much larger. The Declaration was meant for the people in the thirteen rebellious American colonies, and for the world. It was a public statement of high treason but one that also tried to express why the representatives of the British colonies in the Second Continental Congress felt that they had no other choice but to break from Great Britain and seek their independence. Before independence could be achieved, however, the colonists needed to explain why they were willing to undertake such a radical, and probably hopeless, course of action.

Jefferson’s draft was a very political document. That it named King George III was intentional and significant. For years the American colonies had complained that Parliament, Great Britain’s legislative body, was going beyond its authority in the policies that it had imposed on the colonies, but they had nonetheless consistently affirmed their loyalty to the king. By levelling their charges against the king in 1776, the colonies were crossing a line that could not be uncrossed. There would be no going back.

**Thomas Jefferson on Natural Rights: Capturing the “American Mind”**

Thomas Jefferson did not write the Declaration of Independence alone. He had been appointed to lead a committee of five men to draft a document that would announce and justify the decision of the Second Continental Congress to declare the independence of the thirteen American colonies from Great Britain. Like most members of the Congress, Jefferson had known very few of his fellow delegates before he came to Philadelphia. Two of the members of his committee, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, became his close friends. Jefferson’s draft was edited and revised by his fellow committee members and then by the Second Continental Congress, which upset Jefferson greatly: “The more alterations Congress made on his draft, the more miserable Jefferson became.”24

Jefferson’s Declaration was not an original take on the question of independence. It was not supposed to be. His task was to persuade colonists and European powers of the rightness

1. The Declaration of Independence _____ the residents of the rebellious British colonies.
   a. Granted fundamental political privileges to
   b. Recognized the fundamental 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

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

5. What is the difference between political culture and political ideology?

Answers: 1. b; 2. c; 3. a; 4. Answers should include a discussion of inalienable rights, liberty, religious beliefs, and American exceptionalism. 5. Answers should cover how political culture refers to a shared set of beliefs about how political processes should work, while political ideology refers to preferred outcomes from those processes.
of their course of action. To do so, Jefferson drew on arguments and ideas with which people were already familiar. Otherwise, his arguments would not have had the impact that they needed to have. Jefferson saw his own role in this way. In a letter written in 1825, he reflected on the document that he had drafted, pointing to his efforts to use “common sense” and “plain” terms in capturing the “American mind.” He wrote, “Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.”

Jefferson drew on his own earlier writings, on lessons from history, and on ideas about liberty and government widely known in the colonies and Great Britain. The American revolutionaries were well familiar with the histories and writings of ancient Greece and Rome. Democracy (from the Greek δημοκρατία, meaning “people,” and κρατος, or “power”), whereby power is held by the people, had been instituted in the city-states of ancient Greece, Athens in particular. Democracy in Athens, however, was far from universal. Full citizenship was restricted to free males who owned property. These citizens were allowed to vote on matters of public policy.

Also central to the philosophy of the American Revolution were the ideas of the Enlightenment, a period in Europe in which
reason and science were applied to better understand the physical and social worlds. From the British Enlightenment, the revolutionaries drew on the works of John Locke, who had argued against the divine, or God-given, right of kings to rule with absolute power. Instead, Locke argued 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. Locke was himself a political writer. His works sought to defend the authority and legitimacy of British Parliament against excessive power of the British monarch.

From the French Enlightenment, Jefferson and other revolutionary thinkers drew on the works of Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, who had affirmed the ideas of natural rights and the social contract and also helped to give these goals an institutional form. Montesquieu proposed that power in government should be divided between different branches so that no one branch could become too powerful. He also argued that slavery violated the principles of natural law.

Jefferson also drew upon Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume, who explored the idea that there could be a science of politics just as there was a developing science of the natural world. 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**.

Is political science really a science? That is a very good question, and one that still gets debated. In one sense, it is often not a science, at least not in the ways in which we often think about science. Say that you are a researcher in a lab trying to find a cure for a disease. You will assign your test subjects randomly; some will receive the treatment and some will not. While political scientists can and do try for random assignment, especially those who study individual political behavior, more often than not, they cannot actually achieve this. Voters, for example, are not randomly assigned. Educational policymakers could never sell a trial program in which parents are told, “Your student has an equal chance of being assigned to an excellent school or one with poor outcomes.” On the other hand, political scientists do bring scientific techniques to bear upon important questions of power and representation, efforts that we will explore throughout this book.

**Natural Law and the Declaration of Independence: The Case against Bad Government**

The opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence, as finally revised (see Appendix), lay out the philosophy of natural rights that forms the basis for the justification for pursuing independence. According to the ideas on which Jefferson and his contemporaries were drawing, it is not enough to point to the existence of natural rights and then declare independence. One must also lay out, in detail, the ways in which a government has violated these rights. Lawyer that he was, Jefferson followed his appeal to natural law by laying out a long list of charges against King George III. In fact, most of the text of the document consists of charges...
of bad government against the king: “The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.”

Jefferson and the members of the Second Continental Congress were being literal when they spoke of submitting the facts to a “candid world.” The document was intended to be read by the governments of Britain’s European rivals, whom the colonial radicals hoped to ally with or gain assistance from. Without a formal statement of independence, backed by solid evidence, the colonies would not be able to secure assistance from outside powers. Without that assistance, defeating the greatest military power in the world was almost certain to end in failure and in execution for Jefferson and his co-conspirators.

After a long list of charges against the king, Jefferson and the members of the Second Continental Congress formally announced their break from Great Britain, declaring, “We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, 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.”

Of all of 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. It read, “He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.”

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. It appears that Jefferson did privately wrestle with the contradiction of asserting the rights of a new nation that continued to preserve and protect slavery. Why he chose to include this charge in the original draft is subject to some historical debate.

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. The logic of this charge would have been very well understood by Jefferson’s fellow southerners. The charge read, “He is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.”

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—anew nation announcing its birth on the foundation of freedom while holding hundreds of thousands of people in slavery—remained.

The Declaration of Independence did not fall out of the sky or emerge spontaneously from the minds of Thomas Jefferson or the members of the Second Continental Congress. Its creation was shaped by politics and history. It was the product of actions, strategies, calculations, and miscalculations of countless individuals, many of whose stories are unremembered...
and untold. The events leading up to the drafting of the Declaration offer important lessons in the history and development of American government. To begin to explore these lessons, we have to jump back in time, over a century and a half before Jefferson sat down at his homemade desk in Philadelphia, to a set of events that took place both in the Americas and globally: the establishment of the British colonies in North America and the legacy of war between the European powers in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

**WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?**

1. Thomas Jefferson did not intend his draft of the Declaration of Independence to introduce a new political philosophy to the world.
   a. True
   b. False

2. The philosophy behind the idea of the social contract instructs citizens above all else to _____.
   a. Obey their political leaders
   b. Make political change if rights and liberties have been violated
   c. Invest in businesses and corporations
   d. Form social networks

3. The two key sections that the Second Continental Congress deleted from Thomas Jefferson’s initial draft of the Declaration of Independence both referred to _____.
   a. Economic inequality
   b. Plans and preparations for war
   c. The need to gain help from Great Britain’s rivals
   d. Slavery

4. Why might have the delegates to the Second Continental Congress deleted Thomas Jefferson’s charges against King George III on the issue of slavery?

Answers: 1. a; 2. b; 3. c; 4. Answers might include strategic politics, the appearance of hypocrisy, and/or the need to maintain unity among the colonies.

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**THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

**Ideals and Strategic Politics**

In April of 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. The eventual expansion of what became the thirteen colonies of British America forever altered the lives of the native peoples whose societies covered the lands of North America as well as those of the enslaved Africans who later found themselves there as well. The lived experiences of both groups of individuals reverberated throughout American history and had profound effects that many did not, or could not have, predicted.

**Indigenous Peoples in North America**

To the Europeans, the Western Hemisphere was known as the “New World.” To the millions of indigenous peoples spread out across two continents, it was the Europeans who were new. The arrival of the Europeans proved utterly destructive to indigenous 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 perhaps 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 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.

**Slavery in the British Colonies**

The first group of twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 aboard a Dutch ship. They were not the first people of African descent to come to the Western Hemisphere; Spanish explorers had brought with them slaves as well as soldiers and scouts of African descent. 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” though 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 struggled to maintain their ways of life, spiritual and cultural traditions, kinship networks, families, and dignity over the coming centuries.

At times, slaves in Virginia and other slave-holding 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, and “the great majority of those [slaves] convicted of capital crimes were either hanged or burned alive, their bodies often dismembered or hung in chains for public display.”

**Colonial Independence and Autonomy**

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, 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 that they had enjoyed for so long.

**Global War and Its Aftermath**

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*. 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. 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. 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 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.” In the minds of many American revolutionaries, they would get just that.

The Treaty of Paris left Great Britain as the unquestioned European power in North America, in Canada, and in the modern United States east of the Mississippi River. Spain gained territories from France as well. 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.

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. The Revenue Act of 1764, also called the **Sugar Act**, was designed to assert tighter control over trade, especially to reduce smuggling and bribes, which were costing Great Britain money. In addition, the act sought to raise money...
The American Revolution

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to pay for the administration and defense of the colonies by collecting a tax on sugar and molasses (used for making rum), which had already existed but had often been ignored.

For its part, Parliament felt that it was “just and necessary that a revenue be raised in [its] Majesty’s said dominions in America for defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing the same.”43 The Sugar Act actually reduced the tax on molasses, but it ended up favoring planters in the West Indies over New England rum merchants, and it introduced taxes on other imported goods into the colonies, such as coffee, wine, and imported cloth. The Townshend Acts of 1767 taxed goods that were imported from Great Britain and were also unpopular in the colonies.

One of the most controversial of these laws was the **Stamp Act of 1765**, which attempted to raise money through direct taxes—not just tariffs on trade—by requiring the purchase of a stamp for nearly anything that involved trade, publication, or legal transactions, including

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**FIGURE 1.1**
European Territorial Claims before and after the Seven Years’ War

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 was enormously difficult.

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**Stamp Act of 1765**

a highly unpopular law designed to raise revenue by requiring the purchase of stamps for newspapers, legal papers, and other documents.
“newspapers, pamphlets, cards, dice . . . wills, certificates, [and] academic degrees.” The Stamp Act had its opponents in Parliament, mostly those worried how it might affect profits from the colonies. Even these opponents in Great Britain, however, felt that Parliament was justified in using its legislative power to get the colonists to share in the burden of their defense and support. Colonists, though, saw things differently. What else, many wondered, might be taxed next?

To make matters worse, these acts were instituted during an economic depression in the colonies. That one of these acts forbade colonial printing of money to help pay off debt and that the stamps and duties had to be bought and paid for in hard money (gold, silver, and currency backed by gold and silver) only made things worse, especially for the New England merchants. 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.

In this uncertain political environment, there were a few who advocated for resistance to Great Britain, some who remained loyal to Great Britain throughout the coming crisis, 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.

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 in its policy towards 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. How did European colonization of North America impact the indigenous peoples?
4. Why was opposition to the Stamp Act on the part of residents of the British colonies in North America so strong?

Answer Key: 1. b; 2. a; 3. Answers might include both the devastation to societies and populations and actions of resistance and survival; 4. Answers might include the fact that it was a direct tax and fears of what other forms of commerce might be taxed at later dates.

THE AMERICAN RADICALS
From Ideas to Strategic Action to Political Institutions

They were the viral videos of colonial America. Cheap, adaptable, quick to produce, able to reach large numbers of people in a short period of time, and with no central control over their content, they were perfectly suited to the tumultuous times of pre-revolutionary America. They were called pamphlets; their creators, pamphleteers. They consisted of a few printer’s sheets stitched together with thread. They were produced on printing
The American Radicals

presses, roughly 6 x 6 contraptions of metal, screws, wood, and ink. It was hardly a new technology; the printing press was over three hundred years old by the time of the American pamphleteers. But the technology had become cheaper. Enough people had access to it and the ability to read its products to make the pamphlet a potentially revolutionary technological innovation. According to Bernard Bailyn, “It was in this form that much of the most important and characteristic writing of the American Revolution appeared.”

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. Unlike their British counterparts, who had taken the pamphlet and refined it into something like a witty play or parlor game, the American pamphleteers were mostly amateurs. They 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.

The Idea of Independence: Thomas Paine’s Common Sense

Of all of the American pamphleteers, the most widely read was Thomas Paine. His 1776 pamphlet, Common Sense, sold perhaps more than one hundred thousand copies in its first year alone, rivaling in terms of its reach any modern bestseller or viral video. He was, according to one historian, “the greatest pamphleteer of the Age of Revolution.” Paine was also one of 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.”

Paine was a recent arrival in the colonies, having come to Philadelphia from England in 1774 to establish a school for young women. In this endeavour, he was aided by enough money from a separation settlement with his wife to avoid indentured servitude, plus he possessed letters of introduction from Benjamin Franklin. Many American pamphleteers did not like Paine’s work. They thought it too emotional, not reasoned enough. While Paine’s contemporaries may have had problems with his style, the people who bought his pamphlet did not. 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 that it was 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. The strategies of radical leaders in the colonies and the responses of the British government to these actions also played a key role. Adjusting their strategies along the way, the radicals helped drive the uncommitted colonists away from the possibility of reconciliation with Great Britain.

After passage of the Stamp Act and other unpopular policies, 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

In 1765, in response to the Stamp Act, a group of merchants and workingmen, including Sam Adams, formed the “Loyal Nine,” a group that later expanded into the Sons of Liberty. Through rallies, sermons, protests, and heavy use of the newspapers, the Sons and similar groups tried to mobilize public opinion in support of resistance to Great Britain and its tax policies. It was a working-class organization, with a potentially much larger appeal to the general public than the revolutionary elites. That potential made the Sons 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. Acts of violence in response to British policy only reinforced this fear, causing “some conservative American political leaders . . . to worry more about the danger of mobs than they did about British policies.”

On August 26, 1765, in a “scene of riot, drunkenness, profaneness, and robbery,” a Boston mob associated with the Sons of Liberty ransacked the house of Thomas Hutchinson, then lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, “splintered the furniture, beat down the inner walls, tore up the garden, and carried off into the night, besides £900 sterling in cash, all of the plate, decorations, and clothes that had survived, and destroyed or scattered in the mud all of Hutchinson’s books and papers.”

As a strategy of political mobilization the group’s actions backfired. 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 Stamp Act Congress issued a “Declaration of Rights and Statement of 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

In spite of 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

In 1773 the Boston Sons of Liberty seized upon an even greater crisis, one partly of their own making, 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. Britain may have thought that the colonists would be happy to have cheaper tea. If so, they guessed wrong. 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, for not only were they threatened with the loss of their profits on tea, but they were confronted also with the possibility that the same company or other companies would be granted monopolies in such commodities as silks, drugs, and spices, all of which were essential articles of colonial life.”

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. Historians debate Sam Adams’s precise role in the Tea Party; some have argued that he helped to plan it. Adams certainly was, however, quick to jump on the crisis, defend the principles behind it, and publicize the events to radicals in other American colonies. 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, “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.” The actions of the British government and the Boston radicals had both helped to synchronize these thirteen clocks.

The Natural Rights of African Americans in Colonial America

As colonial America moved towards 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 women, many religious minorities, indigenous peoples, and African Americans in the register of those capable of full citizenship and the rights associated with it. The willingness 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. Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts before the war, questioned how the American revolutionaries could “justify the depriving
Lemuel Haynes on Natural Rights and Slavery

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 Coaeval with his Existence. And as it proceed from the Supreme Legislature of the univers, so it is he which hath a sole right to take away; therefore, he that would take away a mans Liberty assumes a prerogative that Belongs to another, and acts out of his own domain.”

In the tradition of and expectations for such appeals to natural rights in the face of oppression, Haynes’s pamphlet documented the injustices of the institution of slavery. In this passage, he addressed the slave trade:

> Let us go on to consider the great hardships, and sufferings those Slaves are put to, in order to be transported into these plantations. There are generally many hundred slaves put on board a vessel, and they are Shackkled together, two by two, wors than Criminals going to the place of Execution; and they are Crouded together as close as posable, and almost naked; and their sufferings are so great, as I have Been Credibly informed, that it often Carries off one third of them on their passage; yea, many have put an End to their own Lives for very anguish; And as some have manifested a Disposition to rise in their Defense, they have been put to the most Cruel torters, and Deaths.”

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.”

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.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Lemuel Haynes’s pamphlet used the ideas of the American revolutionaries to point out the incompleteness of their project at the time. In your own experience, have you encountered situations, publications, or political communications in which others have done the same thing today? If you were to write a pamphlet or post a video, how might you base your own goals for a more complete realization of the promise of American democracy upon an argument for fundamental rights?
“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.”66

Institutionalizing Independence

By the time the delegates to a second congress convened in Philadelphia in May 1775, the “war of pamphlets and protests was giving way to the war of rifles and cannon.”69 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 that 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.70 The Second Continental Congress was perpetually in crisis, trying to fight a war in the face of what seemed like unending military defeats, 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 non slave-holding states, large and small colonies, and urban and rural colonists. These divisions would become more important once independence had actually been achieved.

Opponents of independence had many arguments on their side. First, in a full war, they would probably lose. They were almost hopelessly outclassed militarily. Failure, as all knew, would mean execution for treason. Many elites also worried that independence, even if it could be obtained, would lead to chaos and anarchy. The actions of the mobs of Boston had not been forgotten.

Radicals, for their part, could point to the fact that they were already in armed conflict with Great Britain, and successfully, though these early successes were soon to be followed by defeat after defeat. Public opinion was moving their way and was powerfully impacted by the publication of Thomas Paine’s Common Sense. Perhaps most importantly, radicals had the actions of the British government and its administrators to thank for shifting the balance of power their way.

In the early months of 1776, events began to accelerate towards 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.”
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.”71

Congress was not quite ready to act on the Lee Resolution. The vote was postponed
for three weeks in order 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, con-
sisting of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert
R. Livingston, was charged with writing a declaration, a justification, for American inde-
pendence. 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.

Revolutionary Women: Invisibility, Exclusion, and Building Other Institutions

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-
compassing term fails to capture significant differences in the status, economic class,
and religious orientation of the women in question.72 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.73 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.74

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, how-
ever, 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 as 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.75 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 pub-
lic “joining” that was itself a departure from and challenge to traditional gendered roles.76

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: “No contribution, however small, would be rejected,” though the women who canvassed door to door for donations “attempted to pass over the homes of women known to be indigent or without funds to spare.”

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. A leader from the local “pooling group” collected and recorded the donations. “The treasurer would then send the register and the money to the wife of the governor of the state, and she in turn would forward the money to ‘Mistress Washington’” to deliver the funds to her husband, George. 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.

The language in Reed’s pamphlet was constructed with colonial conventions in mind. In justifying the women’s actions, Reed used the language of gendered differences that served to exclude women from political life at the time, but she used it to her own purpose. She wrote, “They [the women] aspire to render themselves more really useful, and this sentiment is universal from the north to the south of the Thirteen United States. Our ambition is kindled by the fame of those heroines of antiquity, who have rendered their sex illustrious and have proved to the universe that if the weakness of our Constitution, if opinion and manners did not forbid us to march to glory by the same paths as the Men, we should at least equal and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good.”

A Revolution 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. He survived his historic defeat at the hands of the American revolutionaries to oversee the unification of Ireland and England, thus forming the United Kingdom. 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 American pamphleteers were mostly trying to show their literary skills.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Many colonial American elites worried about some of the actions of the Sons of Liberty because they _____.
   a. Were supporting Great Britain and its policies
   b. Failed to repeal the Stamp Act
   c. Were advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples
   d. Threatened mob rule

3. Lemuel Haynes and Esther de Berdt Reed both acted during the revolutionary period. How were their efforts similar? How were they different?

4. What political institutions did Esther de Berdt Reed help build? Why does this matter?

Answer Key: 1. b; 2. d; 3. Answers might focus on similarities between their appeals to natural rights but also on differences between their specific tactics.; 4. Answers should focus on the transcolonial nature of women’s cooperation.

INSTITUTIONS MATTER, TOO

As we have seen in the stories above, 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 1.2.)

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 political institutions the rules, laws, and structures that channel and shape political action.

direct democracy a political system in which citizens vote directly on public policies.

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

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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, comprised of bodies at the local, state, and national levels. The most important institution in American political life, however, is the United States 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 300 million people. In addition, and crucially, limits are placed upon the power of

**FIGURE 1.2**

Types of Governments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Totalitarian</th>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
<th>Representative Democracy</th>
<th>Direct Democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All power claimed by central government.</td>
<td>Central government claims most power but some social and economic institutions may exist.</td>
<td>Citizens select representatives who vote on policy.</td>
<td>Citizens vote directly on public policies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Power concentrated in central government | Power concentrated in citizenry
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 do not only structure the politics of a nation, they 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 **communist systems**, a government acting on behalf of all workers in a society controls the means of production and distribution. In **socialist systems**, 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 (Figure 1.3).

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**FIGURE 1.3**

Types of Economic Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communist Economy</th>
<th>Socialist Economy</th>
<th>Regular 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 allowed 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>

---

**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.

**socialist system**
a way of structuring economic activity in which private firms are allowed to operate and make decisions over production and distribution but with significant governmental involvement to ensure economic equality.

**capitalist system**
a way of structuring economic activity in which private firms are allowed to make most or all of the decisions involving the production and distribution of goods and services.
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.” A few cried.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, the two leaders had tried to show calmness and strength. Prior to leaving for Birmingham, one evening King lightened the mood of all present when, looking at Abernathy and knowing well his friend’s habits, he said, “Let me be sure to get arrested with people who don’t snore.” On the night before the march, King 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 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 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.

**WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?**

1. American political decisions are made primarily through the practice of direct democracy.
   - a. True
   - b. False

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

3. What is the primary difference between capitalist and socialist economic systems?
   - a. Place their rights in the hands of unelected officials
   - b. True
   - c. False
   - d. Place their rights in the hands of unelected officials

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

King’s Affirmation of Natural Rights

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.
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, “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’ ‘Councillor’ 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 Texas No Limit 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 Unites States or not. In their own ways, Bridget Mergens and the members of the Boyd County High Gay-Straight Alliance did the same thing.

1. Civil disobedience focuses primarily on using the nation’s civil courts to make change.
   a. True
   b. False
2. In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King was responding to _______.
   a. White supremacist groups, to persuade them to cease their violent attacks on black people
   b. The president of the United States, to urge him to step in and force southern states to pass laws barring segregation
   c. Students in Birmingham, to inspire them to join in nonviolent protest
   d. White clergy members, in reaction to their urging King and others to pursue their response to injustice via the court system
3. How is “Letter from Birmingham Jail” similar to the Declaration of Independence? How is it different?

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 fulfilment 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, both about 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 Gay-Straight Alliance, Thomas Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. writing “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” and many other smaller stories about individuals who
used the written and spoken word, political action, and protest to claim their own rights? 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 between 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 did 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 of 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 oppressing 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 below. By reviewing them here you should be able to remember the key points, connect them to the stories presented in the chapter, think critically about these questions, and know these terms that are central to the topic.

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.
Chapter Review

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.

**CONNECT**
- The rights claimed by Bridget Mergens and the Boyd County High GSA, though seemingly opposed to one another, come from the same set of shared ideas and values that make up American political culture.

**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?

**KNOW**
- *American political culture* (p. 7)
- *social equality* (p. 7)
- *political equality* (p. 7)
- *economic equality* (p. 7)
- *inalienable rights* (p. 7)
- *liberty* (p. 8)
- *the American dream* (p. 8)
- *American exceptionalism* (p. 10)
- *political ideology* (p. 10)

1.3 Examine the ways in which natural rights and the theory of the social contract helped to shape the ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

**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.
- The Declaration was shaped by the politics and historical context of American colonies trying to assert themselves in the face of tyranny.
- Jefferson drew on ideas of democracy from ancient Greece and Rome as well as on ideas from Enlightenment philosophers, such as John Locke, Montesquieu, and David Hume.
- The drafters left out some important ideas that would have had serious implications for the country and its people. In practice, natural rights have been unevenly applied.
**CONNECT...**
- The roles of Thomas Jefferson as a Virginian, a student of politics and history, and a slave owner played an important part in shaping the Declaration of Independence.
- The cases of Bridget Mergens and the Boyd County High GSA were both enabled by the idea of natural rights and in some ways constrained by a social contract.

**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?

**KNOW...**
- democracy (p. 13)
- natural rights (p. 13)
- social contract (p. 13)
- political science (p. 13)

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**1.4** Identify the factors that gave rise to the American Revolution and discuss the war’s legacy, both in what was and what was not achieved.

**REMEMBER...**
- The British colonists depended upon American Indians for their survival. As the colonial population grew and demands for territories increased, colonists came into violent conflict with native peoples.
- 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.
- Colonists began to establish forms of state government for the purpose of representation and administration and increasingly asserted their authority and autonomy from Great Britain.
- 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.

**CONNECT...**
- The stories of Bridget Mergens and the Boyd County High GSA show us that the struggle to extend rights to certain people and groups is ongoing.
- The ideas Jefferson brought the Declaration of Independence were a direct result of the political and historical context of his time.
- Many of the same ideals fought for in the American Revolution had gone unfulfilled for other groups throughout much of American history.
- The ideas and actions of the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century responded to these unfulfilled promises given voice in the revolutionary period.

**THINK...**
- How did the history of the American colonial experience shape the drive towards independence?
- What role did political propaganda play in mobilizing American public opinion leading up to the American Revolution? What role do you think it plays today?

**KNOW...**
- Seven Years’ War (p. 17)
- Albany Plan (p. 18)
- Sugar Act (p. 18)
- Stamp Act of 1765 (p. 19)
- political propaganda (p. 21)
- Sons of Liberty (p. 22)
- Intolerable Acts (p. 24)
- Second Continental Congress (p. 26)
- Daughters of Liberty (p. 27)
1.5 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.

CONNECT . . .

• Bridget Mergens and the Boyd County High GSA used a variety of political institutions to advance their rights.

• In rejecting British rule, Jefferson knew that America would need to create its own political institutions that protected the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

THINK . . .

• What form of government does America have?

• How are political decisions in America made?

• What kind of economic system does America have?

KNOW . . .

• political institutions (p. 29)

• direct democracy (p. 29)

• representative democracy (p. 29)

• constitutional republic (p. 30)

• economy (p. 31)

• communist systems (p. 31)

• socialist system (p. 31)

• capitalist system (p. 31)

1.6 Compare Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to Thomas Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence in terms of their ideas and the political strategies of their authors.

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.

CONNECT . . .

• Hundreds of years after the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, King based his claim for full rights for African Americans upon the idea of natural rights.

THINK . . .

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