THE BEGINNING OF ATLANTIC REVOLUTIONS

By 1750, Europe had been economically, politically, culturally, and socially transformed, setting the stage for its ability to dominate the world in the era from 1750 to 1914. An important force at work was Enlightenment thought, which challenged traditional political regimes that rested on aristocratic privilege and the inherited power of monarchs. These radical thoughts came from people on both sides of the Atlantic, and they inspired political revolutions first in North America, then in France, and eventually in many other parts of the network that formed around the Atlantic Ocean in the previous era. These revolutions influenced the development of strong national identities based on the abstract concept of the nation-state instead of the authority of a king.

The American Revolution, 1775-1783

The first major Enlightenment-inspired revolution occurred among the British colonies in North America, far from the Enlightenment's philosophical centers in Western Europe. The forces that led to the American Revolution were part of a wider mid-18th century struggle for power between England and France that caused the two countries to fight the Seven Years' War on fronts not only in North America, but also in Europe and India. In North America, the conflict was known as the French and Indian War, and even though the British won, their efforts had been extraordinarily expensive. To help pay for the war and the administration of their newly enlarged empire, the British Parliament levied new taxes on the colonies, an action that was quite popular in thirteen of Britain's North American colonies. The colonies were not only incensed by new laws, such as the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Act of 1767, and the Tea Act of 1773, but by strict enforcement of old navigation laws that had been widely ignored before. Their argument of "no taxation without representation" was testament to the power of Enlightenment thought: as British subjects, they should have a say in the creation of policies that affected their welfare. Just as much so, the American Revolution developed in reaction to Britain's mercantilist economic policies toward the colonies. Tensions escalated as colonists boycotted British products, dumped British tea into Boston Harbor, and skirmished with British troops charged with keeping order in the area around Boston, Massachusetts, where resistance was most evident.

On July 4, 1776, a representative delegation signed the Declaration of Independence that, from their point of view, severed ties to Britain and created an independent nation. Since Britain did not agree, a war followed, fought entirely in North America, that eventually resulted in victory for the colonists and a humiliating defeat for one of the most powerful empires in the world. The last battle was fought at Yorktown, Virginia in 1781, where British forces surrendered to General George Washington. The peace treaty was finally signed in Paris in 1783.

Many factors shaped the success of the American Revolution, including the ability of the colonies to enlist the help of France in their struggle for independence. The revolutionaries were persistent, the British made some serious blunders, and French participation threatened to escalate the conflict, so in the peace treaty of 1783, the British government formally recognized American independence. In 1789, the new nation, the United States of America, created a constitution based on Enlightenment principles, with separation of powers and checks and balances among the branches of government and written guarantees of individual liberties. The US Constitution is the oldest written constitution still in use in the world today. Ten amendments to the Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, were soon added to protect basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion, as well as the rights of people
accused of crimes. Some limited voting rights gave the government a basis in popular sovereignty (rule of the people). The United States was a democracy, but more specifically a democratic republic. A federalist system was also created for this republic in which political powers were divided between national and state levels in an effort to avoid concentrating control in the hands of one person.

Despite the revolutionary nature of the political changes in late 18th century North America, social changes were not as radical. Although a number of representatives at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 supported the abolition of the slave trade, the decision was to extend it for 20 years, and the institution of slavery was left intact. Voting rights were established by the states, but generally only property-owning free males could vote, leaving a large number of people without franchise (suffrage). Even so, the framework of the new political system, based on Enlightenment values of freedom and equality, provided the basis for extending individual rights in later years.