Chapter 7: Creating a New Nation, 1775-1788

Overview
By the end of 1774 conflict between the colonies and Great Britain seemed inevitable, but no one anticipated the war would take eight years to conclude. Having defeated the British and won independence, the Americans faced a more daunting challenge: living up to its revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and equality. The political divisions which had existed all along became permanent in the battle over the Constitution. Nationalists wanted a strong central or national government; the localists feared that a strong central government would do nothing but steal their liberty. The division reflected a difference of opinion about the future of America’s political economy.

Key Topics
• How Revolutionary ardor and early victories led Americans to think that the war would be short and relatively easy
• Revolutionary thought as an amalgam of republican, evangelical, and Enlightenment liberal ideas
• The politics of declaring independence and establishing new state governments
• American and British military strategies; the struggle to win the allegiance of the civilian population; why the British could have won the war, but not the peace; the role played by France and Spain
• The challenges presented to the economy and social order by the war itself and by revolutionary ideology
• The movement for a Constitution: the problems with the Articles of Confederation, and which groups were most affected by them
• Why the Antifederalists opposed ratification of the Constitution, and how their objections were overcome

Review Questions
✓ Why was Revolutionary ardor highest at the beginning of the war? What were American and British expectations in 1775? Why was independence not declared for another year?
✓ What were American and British strategies for winning the war? What were the chief challenges the Americans faced in mounting the war, and how did they affect military strategy? What were the constraints upon the British in waging a war on American soil?
✓ What was the effect of the war on American society? What challenges did the war present, and how were these challenges met?
✓ Which Americans believed a stronger central government was necessary, and what did they do to create it? What were the compromises they made in writing the Constitution? How did they secure its ratification? What political strategies did they use, and how did they attempt to persuade other Americans? Why did the Antifederalists oppose the Constitution, and why were they defeated?

Annotated chapter outline
James Madison Helps Make a Nation: James Madison, a short and slightly built young man believed he would not live long enough to contribute anything to his world. The American Revolution proved him wrong. He became one of the young nation’s most able leaders. He helped create the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and devoted his life to establishing a government which would not only protect liberty and order but also enhance its political economy.
The War Begins: By the end of 1774 conflict between the colonies and Great Britain seemed inevitable, but no one anticipated the war would take eight years to conclude.
The publication in January 1776 of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* told American readers that the period of debate was closed. Richard Henry Lee’s resolution of independence was incorporated into the Declaration of Independence and approved by all delegates on July 2.

The Americans now had to create a permanent national government. The Articles of Confederation sketched out a remarkably weak central government whose powers were lessened because the state governments feared they might otherwise lose power.

**Winning the Revolution:** Great Britain’s military forces were superior to the colonists’ forces but Britain had a flawed premise about how the war would be won.

- At first the British assumed that colonial resistance was limited to New England and that if it isolated and punished Boston the war would be over. Victory was seven years in coming.

**The Challenge of the Revolution:** Having defeated the British and won independence, the Americans faced a more daunting challenge: living up to its revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and equality.

- Perhaps as many as 80,000 of almost 500,000 loyalists left the U.S. for life in a British colony.
- Economic upheavals and civil disorder forced Americans to reconsider what kind of government they wanted and what kind of economy and society it would sustain.
- No one institution challenged and contradicted the revolutionary ideal of equality more than slavery. The contradiction was recognized by the revolutionaries, which in itself was a significant and revolutionary advance, but at the moment action on it was not forthcoming.

**New Policy in the West:** The first significant challenge to the new republic came in the west because it was unwilling to create a colonial status for its western lands.

- Following the war, the Indians found themselves with little or no leverage with the new government. Indian land claims were ignored in a new conflict between the states which claimed all the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains and the national government which wanted control of the land and its distribution.
- The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was a compromise among these competing interests.

**Creating a National Government:** Following the war, divisions which had existed all along became permanent in the battle over the Constitution. Nationalists wanted a strong central or national government; the localists feared that a strong central government would do nothing but steal their liberty.

- The nationalists believed the Congress was powerless to address the nation’s most pressing problems, almost all of which concerned the economy. A convention to address the inadequacies of the Articles of Confederation was convened in Philadelphia. Despite areas of real differences of opinion the fifty-five delegates were united in many instances. With compromises on such issues as representation and the representation of the states to the national government the convention was adjourned on September 17, 1787.

**Conclusion:** As the first nation created by revolution, the United States was entering uncharted territory. The revolutionaries, despite some philosophical differences of opinion, were united in their vision of what they did not want. As the revolutionaries matured, they began to envision the kind of society and nation they hoped to create.

**Analytical reading** These questions refer to the passage “Can Women be Citizens?” on pages 165-166.

1. What positive changes did the Revolutionary War bring to American women?
2. What is the relationship of the Enlightenment and republican values to changes in the lives of American women?
3. The authors write that the revolutionary impulse had its limits. For women, what were those limits?
Lecture Strategies

Chapter Seven takes the story of America’s past to the next level. Revolution and independence are intriguing topics, especially if you prepare your students for appreciating the complexity of the issues. You may want to start with the classic argument about whether the revolution was indeed a revolution. Ask them to consider what was revolutionary about the American war? If the war was not revolutionary, was the abandonment of the Articles of Confederation and the adoption of a new Constitution revolutionary? Did the American society change or in any way abandon its British roots?

With independence, the new nation is beset with problems: Discuss diplomatic relations between the fledgling United States and France, Spain, and Holland. What were the Europeans' interests in an independent nation? Were they more favorably disposed to the notion of an independent republic or were they looking at Britain’s loss as their potential gain?

Consider, too the following topics for classroom discussion:

Diplomatic relations with Great Britain: How is the Treaty of Paris 1783 negotiated? What are the provisions? Why did Great Britain offer land all the way to the Mississippi River instead of limiting the United States to land between the Atlantic and Proclamation Line of 1763?

Declaration of Independence: explore John Locke’s theories of natural rights and the social contract to examine the philosophical ideals in the Declaration of Independence. Help your students see that this was a document with several purposes: a document of propaganda, an explanation of the causes for Americans to declare independence, and a philosophical definition of liberty and equality.

Articles of Confederation, U. S. Constitution, states and national governments, and the creation of political parties: If the purpose of government is to protect and preserve the peoples’ natural rights, ask your students to examine both documents to determine what the creators of the Articles and the Constitution wanted protected and the kinds of things they wanted from their government. The other big issue to discuss is the question of power -- should state governments be more powerful than the national government or vice versa. This fundamental question generates as much debate today as then. The answers to these questions, as well as world view, contribute to the creation of the nation’s first political parties. Your students should come to understand that not everyone believed political factions were desirable or could coexist and that the contests between Federalists and Antifederalists were serious and the stakes high.

Economy: Discuss the financial problems facing the new nation during the war and after the war. How does the new government under the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution reflect our economic needs?

Ask your students to argue the question that has plagued historians writing about the Constitution: Does the Constitution reflect the personal interests of an aristocratic or elite group of wealthy men interested in perpetuating their own economic concerns, or were the framers true patriots committed to the republican values of freedom and equality?

Supplements: Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.

Penguin Classics For colonial slavery see Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative and other Writings, edited with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta, New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Published in 1789, Equiano's account is among the earliest autobiographical accounts of the colonial slave trade and the effects on its victims. Equiano's slavery spans the period from about 1755 to 1766 but it is also his life story that is interesting. For slave narratives see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The Classic Slave Narratives, edited with an introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: A Mentor Book, 1987. The first-hand stories of Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs introduce the reader to slavery from the inside (and over the period of American slavery) and more importantly what it means to be free.


**American Stories: Biographies in United States History** by Katheryn A. Abbott and Patricia Hagler Minter. See Chapter 5, The American Revolution, 1776-1786, for biographical sketches of Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea) and Mercy Otis Warren.

**Documents Collection** see **Era Five: The American Revolution**

- Benjamin Franklin, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c.” 1751
- James Otis, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* 1763
- *The Crisis Comes to a Head: April 19, 1775
- *A Freelance Writer Urges His Readers to use Common Sense* 1776
- *Abigail Adams and John Adams Letters; Abigail Adams Letter to Mercy Otis Warren
- *Petition of “A Grate Number of Blackes of the Province” to Governor Thomas Gage and the Members of the Massachusetts General Court* 1774
- *Rights of Women in an Independent Republic
- *The Rise of Partisan Warfare in the South* 1778

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.