The Age of Reason: The American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence

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Key Figures
Age of Reason

Isaac Newton (1643-1727)
• Saw God as the masterful Creator who no longer intervened in the world.
• Argued that the universe was based on rational and natural laws that could be understood through active reasoning.

John Locke (1632-1704)
• Argued that through the laws of nature, which Locke described as reason, we can understand the need to respect the natural rights of others.
• His empiricism stated that human knowledge is acquired through the senses and experience, that humans do not have innate ideas and concepts.
• Believed in a “government with the consent of the governed.”
Key Figures

Age of Reason

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
- Advocated individual liberty: “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.”
- Argued that progress of knowledge and learning made governments more powerful and crushed individual liberty.
- Wanted sovereignty directly in the hands of the people. Opposed even a representative assembly.
- Argued that governments should implement the will of the people.

François Quesnay (1694-1774)
- Argued that society should be based on the resources of nature and on land itself, influencing Jefferson’s agrarian vision for America
- Saw an economy’s power in its agriculture
Key Figures

Age of Reason

David Hume (1711-1776)

• Argued that governments should only be overthrown in cases of extreme tyranny.

• Advocated the need for balance between individual liberty and strong governmental authority, influenced Madison’s *Federalist*, #10.

• Argued against miracles as a way to support religious doctrine, as miracles were based on human testimony and violated the laws of nature.
Key Figures

American Revolutionary Period

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)
• One of the key figures in the Revolution
• An important statesman for the fledgling nation, Franklin was also a journalist, a publisher, an inventor

George Washington (1732-1799)
• Revolutionary leader and commander in chief of the Continental Army
• First president of the United States

John Adams (1735-1826)
• Constitutional lawyer and advocate of Revolution
• First Vice President and Second President of the United States
Key Figures

American Revolutionary Period

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)
- Primary author of the Declaration of Independence
- First Secretary of State and Ambassador to France
- Second Vice President, and Third President of the United States.

James Madison (1751-1836)
- Fourth president
- Coauthor of *The Federalist*

Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804)
- Influential constitutional delegate
- First Secretary of the Treasury
- Coauthor of *The Federalist*
Key Dates

1754-1763 ▪ The French and Indian War
• Great Britain’s holdings double in the New World
• Great Britain amassed a huge debt
• British upset with colonists lack of support

1760 ▪ King George III ascends to the throne

1764 ▪ The Sugar Act

1765 ▪ The Stamp Act
• Imposed a tax on every printed document in the colonies
• Sons of Liberty, a resistance group, terrorized stamp agents and burned many in effigy.
• Soon after this act, the Great Britain was collecting ten times as much revenue from the colonies as they had before 1763
• Repealed in 1766
Key Dates

1767 • Townshend Acts
• Tax tea, paper, lead, glass

1768 • British troops arrive in Boston

1770 • Boston Massacre

1773 • The Tea Act and the Boston Tea Party

1774 • Coercive Acts or Intolerable Acts
• Closed the port of Boston
• Limited the authority of Massachusetts
• Limited town meetings to once a year
• Colonists could tried in England for certain crimes
Key Dates

1774 ▪ First Continental Congress

1775-1781 ▪ War for American Independence
  • Begins in the early morning hours of April 19 in Lexington

1775 ▪ Second Continental Congress
  • Establishes the Continental Army with George Washington as commander-in-chief

1776 ▪ In January, Thomas Paine’s Common Sense published
  • Sold 100,000 copies within three months
  • Washington commented that it was “working a powerful change in the minds of men.”

July 4, 1776 ▪ Declaration of Independence passed
Key Dates

1777 ▪ British surrender at Saratoga
• A major turning point in the war when General John Burgoyne surrenders to rebels on October 19
• As a result, the French expanded their assistance to the Americans.

1781 ▪ Cornwallis surrenders at Yorktown
• Engaged in battles with Holland, France, and Spain, the British decide to cut their losses in America

1783 ▪ Treaty of Paris formally ends the American Revolution
Key Dates

1787 ▪ Constitutional Convention
• Convention passes the Constitution
• Needed ratification of nine states to go into effect
• The Federalist Papers published to support Constitution
• To gain support, James Madison wrote the Bill of Rights

1789 ▪ George Washington elected president

1789 ▪ The French Revolution
Key Facts about the Period

The eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment provided the framework for the American Age of Reason, the American Revolution, and the Declaration of Independence.

Characteristics of Age of Reason:

• Belief in people’s ability to reason
• Belief in people’s natural goodness and the ability to rise above circumstances of birth, economy, religion, and society
• Belief in rational thinking as a means of establishing a system of ethics, aesthetics, and knowledge
• Rationalistic view of humanity and its relations with God and nature
• Belief that humankind could assume control of nature without offending God
Key Facts about the Period

Characteristics of Age of Reason (cont’d.)

- Attacked authority and called for individual freedoms from restraints
- Sought progress out of a long period of what they thought of as irrationality, reliance on tradition, superstition, and tyranny
- Advocated principles of equality and social justice
- Believed a more benevolent society with people helping people could be accomplished
- Developed a concept of laissez-faire economics which gave rise to capitalism and developed the concept of individualism
- Developed a spirit of scientific inquiry and expressed confidence in the ability to discover causalities
Key Facts about the Period

Characteristics of Age of Reason (cont’d.)

Deism
• Rationalism applied to theology produced Deism.
• Most of the Founding Fathers considered themselves Deists.
• They Refuted Puritan notions of Divine miracles, manifestations, and interventions.
• In general, Deists were more concerned with the practical rather than the spiritual world.
• Degrees of Deism ranged widely.
Key Facts about the Period

Central tenets of Deism

• God created the universe and then disassociated himself from it. He “wound it up” and then stepped back. In Deism, God might be compared to an absentee landlord.
• God cannot be accessed through organized religion, rituals, or sacraments.
• God was more evident in the mechanism of nature than in scriptural revelation.
• Most Deists believed Jesus a great philosopher, teacher, and leader, but not the son of God. God did not select a "chosen people"—not even the Puritans.
Key Facts about the Period

Puritanism could not survive the Age of Reason.

- A secular spirit had emerged.
- A new population of immigrants were not attracted to Puritan culture.
- Urban enterprise and commerce made Puritan tenets seem irrelevant.
- The rationalist spirit made Puritanism seem obsolete, superstitious, and unreasonable.
- The call for general toleration, civil rights, and a more democratic government did not accommodate Puritan notions of superiority as “God’s chosen people.”
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

- On June 11, 1776 a committee of five was charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence.
- The committee chose Thomas Jefferson as chairman. Members included John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston.
- The Declaration was substantially the work of Jefferson, but other committee members had input.
- The first draft was presented on June 28.
- After debate and some changes, the Declaration was passed on July 4.
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

Dual audience
• Jefferson and his committee recognized that the formation of the United States was a momentous occasion in history.
• They were writing not just for present but future audiences.

“Man thinking”
• They exemplified what Emerson termed “man thinking.” That is, they were individuals engaged in all dimensions of life. They combined the life of the mind, the life of the body, and the life of the soul, and they acted from principle.
• They grappled with present and future implications.
• They were devoted to theoretical and philosophical contemplations and practical and pragmatic issues.
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

The Need for Compromise

Slavery

- Jefferson realized that slavery would be a divisive issue, and he also knew that sooner or later slavery would be abolished. He thought it best to abolish slavery at the onset.

The Clause

- [King George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation hither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.

The clause was rejected.
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

Rhetorical Strategies: The Opening Statement

Tone of opening statement.
- Tone is rational, calmly logical, explanatory
- Appeals to logic, a universal value system, and common sense

The stated purpose and content
- Explain to world the reasons for the Revolution

Present theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of rebels
- All people are created equal.
- All people have “unalienable rights”
- The purpose of governments is to preserve those rights
- Revolution is a duty if governments fail to preserve those rights.
- Revolution is a drastic measure and requires careful and prudent consideration.
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

Rhetorical Strategies: The Body
Enumerates Great Britain’s “injuries and usurpations” against the Colonists and their “unalienable rights.”

Appeals to reason and emotion
• Wants the nations of the world to see the logic and just cause of the Revolution and to feel the “patient sufferance” of the colonists.

Uses emotionally charged and loaded language:
• … called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant … for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance
• … formidable to tyrants only
• … swarms of officers to harass
• … excited domestic insurrections amongst us … merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule … is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

Rhetorical Strategies: Closing Statement

Purpose
- Summarize the document
- State the conclusion with absolute clarity and concision and without any possibility of misinterpretation
- Instill confidence in world leaders

Tone
- Authoritative and forceful in its certainty and directness
- Confident and resolved
- Clear sighted and visionary
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

John Adams letter

The Declaration of Independence was formally approved on July 2 and signed on July 4. Consider this excerpt from John Adams’s letter to his wife Abigail in which Adams envisions future commemorations:

The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. —I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.
Key Facts about the Declaration of Independence

The Signers

The fifty-six men who signed the Declaration of Independence committed treason.

They risked their careers, property, and lives.

- Twenty-four were lawyers
- Eleven were merchants
- Nine were farmers and plantation owners

They suffered and struggled as British targets.

- Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned.
- Nine died from wounds or hardships of the War.
- Many lost their investments in businesses and were left impoverished.