

Although there is no consensus about the exact span of time that corresponds to the American Enlightenment, it is safe to say that it occurred during the eighteenth century among thinkers in British North America and the early United States and was inspired by the ideas of the British and French Enlightenments. Based on the metaphor of bringing light to the Dark Age, the Age of the Enlightenment [. . .] shifted allegiances away from absolute authority, whether religious or political, to more skeptical and optimistic attitudes about human nature, religion and politics. In the American context, thinkers such as Thomas Paine, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin invented and adopted revolutionary ideas about scientific rationality, religious toleration and experimental political organization—ideas that would have far-reaching effects on the development of the fledgling nation. Some coupled science and religion in the notion of deism; others asserted the natural rights of man in the anti-authoritarian doctrine of liberalism; and still others touted the importance of cultivating virtue, enlightened leadership and community in early forms of republican thinking. [. . .]

Enlightenment Age Thinking: The pre- and post-revolutionary era in American history generated propitious conditions for Enlightenment thought to thrive on an order comparable to that witnessed in the European Enlightenments. In the pre-revolutionary years, Americans reacted to the misrule of King George III, the unfairness of Parliament (“taxation without representation”) and exploitative treatment at the hands of a colonial power: the English Empire. [. . .] Thomas Paine wrote the famous pamphlet *The Rights of Man*, decrying the abuses of the North American colonies by their English masters. In the post-revolutionary years, a whole generation of American thinkers would found a new system of government on liberal and republican principles, articulating their enduring ideas in documents such as the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Federalist Papers* and the *United States Constitution*.

Six Key Ideas: At least six ideas came to punctuate American Enlightenment thinking: deism, liberalism, republicanism, conservatism, toleration and scientific progress. Many of these were shared with European Enlightenment thinkers, but in some instances took a uniquely American form.

1. Deism

European Enlightenment thinkers conceived tradition, custom and prejudice [. . .] as barriers to gaining true knowledge of the universal laws of nature. The solution was [deism](#) [. . .] basing religious belief on reason and observation of the natural world. [Deists](#) appreciated God as a reasonable Deity. A reasonable God endowed humans with rationality in order that they might discover the moral instructions of the universe in the natural law. [. . .] Deists were typically (though not always) Protestants, sharing a disdain for the religious dogmatism and blind obedience to tradition exemplified by the Catholic Church. Rather than fight members of the Catholic faith with violence and intolerance, most deists resorted to the use of tamer weapons such as humor and mockery.

Both moderate and radical American Enlightenment thinkers, such as James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams and George Washington, were deists. [. . .] In what would become known as the *Jefferson Bible* (originally *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*), Jefferson chronicles the life and times of Jesus Christ from a deist perspective, eliminating all mention of miracles or divine intervention. God for deists such as Jefferson never loomed large in humans’ day-to-day life beyond offering a moral or humanistic outlook and the resource of reason to discover the content of God’s laws. Despite the near absence of God in human life, American deists did not deny His existence. [. . .]

2. Liberalism

Another idea central to American Enlightenment thinking is liberalism, that is, the notion that humans have natural rights and that government authority is not absolute, but based on the will and consent of the governed. [. . .] Liberals favored the Interests of the middle class over those of the high-born aristocracy. [. . .] In this way, liberal thinking was anti-authoritarian. [. . .]

The claim that private individuals have fundamental God-given rights, such as to property, life, liberty and to pursue their conception of good, begins with the English philosopher John Locke, but also finds expression in Thomas Jefferson’s drafting of the *Declaration of Independence*. The U.S. Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution, guarantees a schedule of individual rights based on the liberal ideal. [. . .]

3. Republicanism

While prefigured by the European Enlightenment, the American Enlightenment also promoted the idea that a nation should be governed as a republic, whereby the state’s head is popularly elected, not appointed through a hereditary blood-line. As North American colonists became increasingly convinced that British rule was corrupt and inimical to republican values, they joined militias and eventually formed the American Continental Army under George Washington’s command. The Jeffersonian ideal [. . .] represented the eighteenth-century American as both a hard-working agrarian and as a citizen-soldier devoted to the

republic. When elected to the highest office of the land, George Washington famously demurred when offered a royal title, preferring instead the more republican title of President. [. . .]

4. Conservatism

[NOTE: The discussion of Conservatism touches mostly on elements arising in France during this time. The French Revolution can be, very simply, viewed as the American Revolution without rules. While the American Revolution predates the French Revolution, American revolutionaries were very conscious of not be excessive in their ideals. The discussion concludes with James Madison's conservative view that the public should not be involved in election of governmental officials. This view lost out to Jefferson's liberal view. But Jefferson's liberalism was conservatively tempered: Jefferson proposed that a new constitution be written every twenty years. In other words, it took a cooperation of opposing viewpoints to construct the country.]

5. Toleration

50 Toleration [. . .] was also a major theme in American Enlightenment thought. Tolerance of difference developed in parallel with the early liberalism prevalent among Northern Europe's merchant class. It reflected their belief that hatred or fear of other races and creeds interfered with economic trade, extinguished freedom of thought and expression, eroded the basis for friendship among nations and led to persecution and war. Tiring of religious wars [. . .] European Enlightenment thinkers imagined an age in which enlightened reason not religious dogmatism governed relations between diverse peoples with loyalties to different faiths. [. . .]

55 American thinkers inherited this principle [that] civil government ought to protect liberty of conscience, the right to worship as one chooses (or not to worship at all) and refrain from establishing an official state-sanctioned church. For America's founders, the fledgling nation was to be a land where persons of every faith or no faith could settle and thrive peacefully and cooperatively without fear of persecution by government or fellow citizens. [. . .]

6. Scientific Progress

60 The Enlightenment enthusiasm for scientific discovery was directly related to the growth of deism and skepticism about received religious doctrine. Deists engaged in scientific inquiry not only to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, but to respond to a divine calling to expose God's natural laws. Advances in scientific knowledge—whether the rejection of the geocentric model of the universe because of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo's work or the discovery of natural laws such as Newton's mathematical explanation of gravity—removed the need for a constantly intervening God. With the release of Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia* in 1660, faith in scientific progress took institutional form in the Royal Society of England, the Académie des Sciences in France and later the Academy of Sciences in Germany. In pre-revolutionary America, scientists or natural philosophers belonged to the Royal Society until 1768, when Benjamin Franklin helped create and then served as the first president of the American Philosophical Society. Franklin became one of the most famous American scientists during the Enlightenment period because of his many practical inventions and his theoretical work on the properties of electricity.

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What follows are brief accounts of how four significant thinkers contributed to the eighteenth-century American Enlightenment: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and John Adams.

Franklin

Benjamin Franklin, the author, printer, scientist and statesman who led America through a tumultuous period of colonial politics, a revolutionary war and its momentous, though no less precarious, founding as a nation. In his *Autobiography*, he extolled the virtues of thrift, industry and money-making (or acquisitiveness). For Franklin, the self-interested pursuit of material wealth is only virtuous when it coincides with the promotion of the public good through philanthropy and voluntarism—what is often called “enlightened self-interest.” He believed that reason, free trade and a cosmopolitan spirit serve as faithful guides for nation-states to cultivate peaceful relations. [. . .] In his autobiography, Franklin claims that the way to “moral perfection” is to cultivate thirteen virtues (temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility) as well as a healthy dose of “cheerful prudence.” Franklin was [. . .] a visionary leader in world politics and a strong advocate of religious liberty.

Jefferson

A Virginian statesman, scientist and diplomat, Jefferson is probably best known for drafting the *Declaration of Independence*. Agreeing with Benjamin Franklin, he substituted “pursuit of happiness” for “property” in Locke’s schedule of natural rights, so that liberty to pursue the widest possible human ends would be accommodated. Jefferson also exercised immense influence over the creation of the United States’ Constitution through his extended correspondence with James Madison during the 1787 Constitutional Convention (since Jefferson was absent, serving as a diplomat in Paris). Just as Jefferson saw the *Declaration* as a test of the colonists’ will to revolt and separate from Britain, he also saw the Convention in Philadelphia, almost eleven years later, as a grand experiment in creating a new constitutional order. [. . .]

Madison

Heralded as the “Father of the Constitution,” James Madison was, besides one of the most influential architects of the U.S. Constitution, a man of letters, a politician, a scientist and a diplomat who left an enduring legacy on American philosophical thought. As a tireless advocate for the ratification of the Constitution, Madison advanced his most groundbreaking ideas in his jointly authoring *The Federalist Papers* with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton. Indeed, two of his most enduring ideas—the large republic thesis and the argument for separation-of-powers and checks-and-balances—are contained there. [. . .]

Adams

John Adams was also a founder, statesman, diplomat and eventual President who contributed to American Enlightenment thought. Among his political writings, three stand out: *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1776), *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, Against the Attack of M. Turgot* (1787-8), and *Discourses on Davila* (1791). In the *Dissertation*, Adams faults Great Britain for deciding to introduce canon and feudal law, “the two greatest systems of tyranny,” to the North American colonies. Once introduced, elections ceased in the North American colonies, British subjects felt enslaved and revolution became inevitable. [. . .]

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