

Lesson 2

Developing Republican Government



Key Terms

Age of Enlightenment
capitalism
Christendom
civic virtue
classical republicanism
common good
established religion
factions
hierarchical
Judeo-Christian

Middle Ages
mixed government
nation-state
papacy
providence
public and private morality
Reformation
Renaissance
representative democracy
secular governments

What You Will Learn to Do

- Trace how the American ideas of individual rights developed

Linked Core Objectives

- Communicate using verbal, non-verbal, visual, and written techniques
- Apply critical thinking techniques

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Examine how the ideas of classical republicanism influenced the Founders' ideas of what kind of government they wanted
- Distinguish between classical republicanism and the natural rights philosophy
- Recognize how the ideas of Judeo-Christian tradition, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation and the rise of nation-state and capitalism supported the founders' thinking about natural rights and classical republicanism
- Explore how James Madison refined the ideas of classical republicanism to meet the needs of the new Americans
- Define key words contained in this lesson

Chapter 2

Introduction

The Founders were influenced by many ancient thoughts and ideas. From the Roman perspectives of classical government to the Judeo-Christian traditions of moral obligation, our government began to shape into what Americans' experience and enjoy as privilege today. In this lesson you explore how the ancient world influenced republican government and how modern ideas of individual rights developed.

What the Founders Found in Classical Republicanism

Figure 2.2.1: The architectural style of some government buildings symbolize the influence of ancient Greece and Rome on the founders.

Courtesy of Lester Lefkowitz/Corbis Images.



Most of the public buildings and monuments in Washington, D.C., and state capitols across the nation are built in the “classical” style (see Figure 2.2.1). This architectural tradition symbolizes our nation’s indebtedness to the world of ancient Greece and Rome, especially to their ideas about government.

The Founders had studied the history of the classical periods of ancient Greece and Rome. The society

that had the greatest influence on their ideas was that of the Roman Republic, which lasted for almost 500 years—509 B.C. to 27 B.C. Many philosophers and historians believed the Roman Republic had provided Roman citizens with the most liberty under government that the world had ever known. It also was believed widely that the Roman Republic promoted the **common good**, that is, what was best for the entire society. The theory based on this form of society became known as **classical republicanism**.

In a classical republic, citizens and their government are supposed to work cooperatively to achieve the common good rather than their own personal or selfish interests. The Roman Republic was thought to be one of the best examples of this type of society. Americans in the eighteenth century shared the view that citizens should work to promote the common good. They also believed that the type of government and society most likely to promote the common good was only possible if the society and its citizens shared the following characteristics:

- **Civic virtue**
- **Moral education**
- **Small, uniform communities**

Key Note Term

common good—the good of the community as a whole

classical republicanism—a theory that holds that the best kind of government is one that promotes the common welfare instead of the interests of one class of citizens

Civic Virtue

The classical republics demanded that their citizens have a high degree of **civic virtue** (see Figure 2.2.2). A person with civic virtue was one who set aside personal interests to promote the common good. Today we might describe this as “public spiritedness.”

Citizens were expected to participate fully in their government to promote the common good. They were not to be left free to devote themselves only to their personal interests. They were discouraged from spending much time doing such things as making money or caring for their families. They also were discouraged from traveling or reading and thinking about things that had nothing to do with their government. If citizens had the freedom to do such things, it was feared, they might stop being reliable and fully dedicated to the common good.

To make sure citizens participated in their government, the classical republics often drastically limited individual rights. There was little concern with protecting an individual’s privacy, freedom of conscience or religion, or nonpolitical speech or expression. Certain rights, however, were necessary for citizens to participate in governing themselves. These were political rights, such as the right to vote, to express ideas and opinions about government, and to serve in public office.

Moral Education

People who believed in classical republicanism were convinced that civic virtue is not something that comes automatically to people. Citizens must be taught to be virtuous by moral education based on a civic religion consisting of gods, goddesses, and their rituals.

Classical republicans believed that young citizens must be raised in a manner that develops the right habits. They should learn to admire the people with civic virtue described in literature, poetry, and music. The Founders themselves admired such heroes of antiquity as the Roman patriot and orator Cato and the citizen soldier Cincinnatus. The Founders believed they were examples of civic virtue whom Americans should emulate. George Washington was admired by his fellow Americans as a modern-day Cincinnatus because he sacrificed his private pursuits to lead the nation in war and peace. George Washington was often called “our Cincinnatus” because his fellow citizens believed he was an example of the civic virtue that all citizens should possess.



Figure 2.2.2: President Jimmy Carter joins volunteers to construct low income housing.

Courtesy of Mark Peterson/Corbis Images.

Key Note Term

civic virtue—the dedication of citizens to the common good, even at the cost of their individual interests

Is civic virtue as important in America today as it was in ancient Rome? Why? Why not?

Courtesy of UPI/Bettmann News Photo.



According to classical republicans, children, as well as adults, should be encouraged—partly by the belief in a watchful god or gods—to practice virtues, such as generosity, courage, self-control, and fairness. They should learn the importance of taking part in political debate and military service. The whole community must closely supervise the upbringing of the next generation of citizens and be attentive to how individuals behave in their daily lives.

Small, Uniform Communities

Classical republicans believed that a republican government would only work in a small community. A small community is necessary if people are to know and care for each other and their common good. In addition, the people must be very much alike. A great degree of diversity should not be tolerated. They did not believe, for example, that people should be very different in their wealth, religious or moral beliefs, or ways of life.

Classical republicans believed that if people differed greatly, they would divide into factions or interest groups, rather than work together for the common good. To prevent this, citizens should be encouraged, by education and example, to avoid the development of great differences in their ownership of property, religion, and way of life. To prevent diversity in religious beliefs and lifestyles, they believed the community should have one official, **established religion** and one set of family and moral standards to which all must conform.

Great inequalities of wealth led inevitably to corruption as well as to **factions** or interest groups. Individuals would be more concerned with their own interest rather than the interest of the community. Their fear of great economic inequality and the corrupting effect of luxury led the classical republicans to be wary of money-making and economic growth. Such economic growth, they thought, gave rise to the great economic inequality which was inconsistent with the goals of republicanism.

Key Note Term

established religion—an official, state-sponsored religion

Key Note Term

factions—a group that seeks to promote its own special interests at the expense of the common good



Why did classical republicans believe that republican government could only work in small, uniform communities?

Classical Republicanism

Give the following questions some thought and come up with your answers.

1. Identify someone living today who you think shows civic virtue. Explain the reason for your choice.
2. What did classical republicans think should be the goal of education? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What civic virtues are important for young people to have today and why?
4. What similarities and differences are there between your ideas about rights and those of the classical world?

Develop responses to the following questions. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

1. The classical republican idea of civic virtue conflicted with the Founders' belief in natural rights and their understanding of human nature as defined by John Locke. Create a chart that illustrates the differences between natural rights and classical republicanism. In completing your chart, you may need to review some of the ideas presented in Lesson 1.
2. Suppose you were among the Founders chosen to participate in drafting a constitution. How might you reconcile these differences between natural rights and classical republicanism? Which ideas would you choose to emphasize? Why?
3. What problems might you encounter in transferring some of the ideas of classical republicanism to American society? How might you solve these problems?

How the Founders Thought a Government Should Be Organized to Promote the Common Good

In addition to the example of the ancient Roman Republic, the Founders also learned about republican government from writers of their own time. One of the most important of these was the Baron de Montesquieu (shown in Figure 2.2.3), a French writer who was widely admired by Americans. Montesquieu advocated a system that divided and balanced the power of government among the classes. This, he believed, was the best way to ensure that the government would not be dominated by a single social class and would be able to enhance the common good.

Figure 2.2.3: Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755).

Courtesy of Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis Images.



He admired the Roman Republic as a representative government that combined elements of three basic types of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Because all classes shared power, this type of government seemed best for serving the common good.

Even though Britain was a monarchy, Montesquieu admired the British constitution. He believed it embodied the idea of a **mixed government**, in which power was divided among different classes in British society.

In some respects, the Founders were uncritical admirers of the ancient world, most especially the Roman Republic. They were

inclined to exaggerate the degree to which these states represented the interests of the whole community rather than just the interests of the upper classes. They also overlooked the fact that the ancient republics depended upon the institution of slavery. Their admiration for classical republicanism was based on a somewhat idealized version of antiquity.

The Founders were aware of the difficulty in transplanting ideals of classical republicanism to the newly independent American states. They differed concerning the degree to which these ideals could be adopted. The classical republicanism of the ancient world only flourished in small, uniform communities.

The following expectations of classical republicanism posed several problems for the founders of the new American nation:

- caring for each other and the common good in small communities
- believing that people must be very much alike
- supervising citizens to avoid the development of great differences among them in their ownership of property, religion, and way of life
- believing that great economic inequality is destructive of the common good
- having one official “established” religion and one set of family and moral standards which everyone would follow

Key Note Term

mixed government—a government composed of some of the powers of a monarchial, aristocratical, and democratical government



Were the Founders more representative of the ideas of the natural rights philosophy or classical republicanism? Why?

Penns Treaty with the Indians by Benjamin West, courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

The classical republican idea of civic virtue conflicted with the Founders' belief in natural rights and with their understanding of human nature as defined by Locke and the other natural rights philosophers. The natural rights philosophy considered the rights of the individual to be primary in importance. The state existed to serve the interests of the individual, instead of the other way around. In classical republicanism, the rights of the community as a whole came first.

Americans of the founding era seemed more representative of human nature as described by the natural rights philosophers than the ideal expected by the civic virtue of the classical republicanism. They and their ancestors had come to the new land to take advantage of the opportunities it offered. Such restless, diverse, and ambitious people were ill-suited for the ideals of self-sacrifice and conformity of classical republicanism.

James Madison and the Ideas of Classical Republicanism

James Madison was one of the most important Founders responsible for creating the U.S. Constitution. He has been called “the Father of the Constitution.” He was very influential in translating the ideas of classical republicanism in such a way as to make them practical in the new American republic.

Madison defined the difference between democracies and republics in the following way:

- **In a democracy, the people administer the government themselves. These “direct democracies” must be confined to small communities like the ancient city-states of Greece.**
- **In a republic, the people’s representatives administer the government, allowing it to be extended over a much larger area.**

Key Note Term

representative democracy—the system of government in which power is held by the people and exercised indirectly through elected representatives

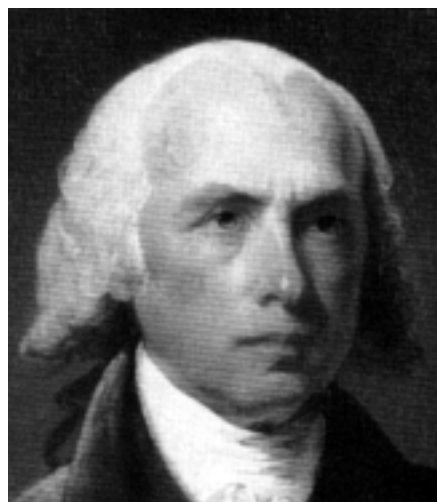
Why did James Madison favor a constitution that limited the power of government?

Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Madison believed, therefore, that America could and should have a republican form of government. Laws would be made and administered by representatives elected by the people. Madison also accepted certain principles of democracy. He insisted that members of government should be elected by a large number of the people, rather than by a small number or a specially favored group.

Such a form of government was a democracy in the sense that it derived its authority—its right to govern—from the people as a whole. Madison's new definition of a republican government, therefore, also could be defined as a **representative democracy**. In this way the two classical ideas of republic and democracy were adapted to the new form of government created by the Founders.

Similar to the other Founders, Madison understood the importance of informed and public-spirited citizens to this new government. He had to modify the classic definition of civic virtue to make it practical in the very different conditions of America. He accepted the natural rights philosophers' view of human nature, that people were motivated primarily by self-interest. He believed that the pursuit of self-interest could in its own way further the common good. For example, a statesman's desire for fame and admiration from others would lead him to practice civic virtue. The common good could be served by each individual pursuing his or her economic self-interest. Each would contribute to the general prosperity.



Madison also realized that as people pursued their own interests they sometimes act against the interests of others and against the common good. Any sound government had to make allowances for this. As Madison said, if all people were angels, there would be no need for government. He argued for a government that would encourage people to act as good republican citizens possessing the quality of civic virtue. At the same time, this government would guard against the consequences if they did not. This is why Madison favored a constitution that limited government by the following methods:

- **separation of powers**
- **a system of checks and balances**

The American adaptation of the principles of classical republicanism was, then, a sort of compromise. The Founders created a form of government they called republican, even though it was different from the models of republicanism in the ancient world.

They believed that it was important for citizens to possess civic virtue. Civic virtue could not be relied upon, however. Therefore, the proper structure provided by a system of representation with separation of powers and checks and balances also was necessary to protect the common good.

Judeo-Christian Heritage Contributes to the Founders' Understanding of Human Rights

The Founders were heirs to another legacy of antiquity, as important in its own way as that of the Greeks and Romans. They belonged to a religious tradition thousands of years old: Judeo-Christianity. Because there are many different faiths within this tradition, most of the Founders had grown up in a religious environment. From early childhood, they were familiar with the teachings of the Bible.

The **Judeo-Christian** world view holds that the world was created and is governed by one God. Humanity occupies a special place in that creation. Each human being is created in God's image and each possesses an immortal soul. For many, the striving for salvation through obedience to God's divine law is of prime importance.

Some Founders were critical of organized religion and skeptical of certain religious doctrines. Most believed in a Supreme Being and in that Supreme Being's interest in humanity and affairs of the world. Above all, they were convinced of the importance of each person obeying the moral code that they believed was given by that Supreme Being.

As you know, the Declaration of Independence acknowledges the "Creator" who "endowed men with certain unalienable rights." The Founders often spoke of **Providence** to suggest their

belief in God's interest and involvement in the affairs of the world. During the writing of the Constitution in the summer of 1787, Benjamin Franklin encouraged his fellow delegates by declaring his conviction that "God governs in the affairs of men." Whatever their particular religious backgrounds, the Founders believed strongly in the importance of the moral principles of Judeo-Christianity to benefit the common good. Judeo-Christian morality was different from the Greek and Roman ideals of civic virtue. Instead of **public morality**, these principles emphasized **private morality** as expressed in biblical teachings such as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. To classical republican virtues—courage, moderation, and wisdom—Judeo-Christianity added other moral qualities, such as love and benevolence toward others.

To achieve what was best for society as a whole, the Founders thought that each person's moral principles and behavior should be based on both classical and Judeo-Christian virtues. They felt that the practice of religion would help people live according to such moral standards. Their religious faith also strengthened the Founders' belief in the ideals of justice and liberty. The Bible stories of the struggle of the Hebrews against oppression and tyranny helped to inspire the American Revolution. These words from the Book of Leviticus are inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Finally, the teachings of Judeo-Christianity also helped to develop the Founders' appreciation of individual rights. Classical republicanism put the good of the state and community above that of the separate interests of the individuals who belonged to it.

Key Note Term

Judeo-Christian—beliefs and practices which have their historical roots in Judaism and Christianity

Key Note Term

Providence—the care, guardianship, and control exercised by a deity

Key Note Term

private and public morality—the principles of civic virtues as expressed in Judeo-Christian teachings, as well as fundamental ideas about right and wrong that come from religion, ethics, and individual conscience



How were a person's rights and responsibilities determined in the Middle Ages?

Courtesy of EPG. International.

The Judeo-Christian view of the individual and his or her place in the world was different. Its teachings stressed the dignity and worth of each human being. It was believed that each person possessed an individual soul. Therefore, the individual assumed a new importance in people's thinking about society and government. Much in the Founders' commitment to liberty and individual rights sprang from their belief in the rightness of such ideals.

Concepts of the Individual and Society during the Middle Ages

Key Note Term

Middle Ages—a period lasting from the fifth century to the fourteenth century, during which the political, economic, and military structure was characterized by feudalism

Key Note Term

Christendom—the Christian world, or Christians in general, considered as a single society

Christianity spread rapidly in the centuries following the death of Jesus and eventually became the predominant faith within the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century A.D., but Christianity survived to shape European society in the centuries that followed. This period, from the fifth century to the fourteenth, we call the **Middle Ages**.

Medieval society was based on the ideas of unity, social harmony, and otherworldliness. The European people of the Middle Ages saw themselves united in a single society called **Christendom**. Their spiritual leader was the Pope in Rome. The Popes enjoyed great authority and respect throughout Europe. There were no nations at this time to compete for people's loyalty. Most people thought of themselves in terms of only two allegiances: to their own local community and to the great unity of Christendom with one "universal" or "catholic" church presiding over it.

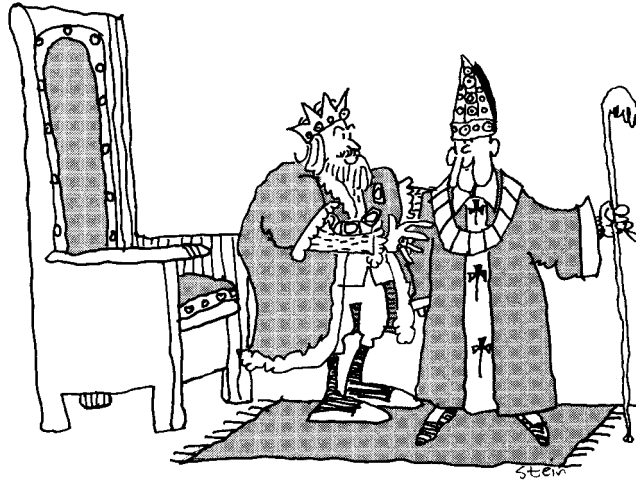
Medieval ideas about society also reflected the harmony that was thought to exist between each individual and the whole of society. Society was sometimes compared to a body, in which some parts were more important than others but all parts were necessary for the good of the whole. The parts were dependent upon each other.

- **Society was divided into different classes and groups such as royalty, nobility, clergy, tradesmen, craftsmen, and peasants. Each class or group had certain rights and responsibilities.**

- Society was *hierarchical*, that is, groups and classes were ranked from the most important at the top to the least important at the bottom. There was no equality between groups and classes.
- Each individual's role in society was defined by his or her role in one of these groups. A person had little chance of leaving the group into which he or she had been born.
- Any rights and duties a person had were usually spoken of in terms of the group to which that person belonged. There was no concept of "natural" or "universal" rights belonging to all people.

Rights were seen as privileges or "liberties" belonging to particular groups in society. Members of the group enjoyed its "rights." There were few individual rights. Medieval society was also other-worldly in its interests and activities. Christianity taught that the primary purpose of this life was to achieve salvation after death in another spiritual eternal life. The most important institutions of the Middle Ages, including churches and monasteries, were devoted to this end. Whatever else people achieved in their lives was secondary.

Economic life in the Middle Ages was based on subsistence agriculture. Most people lived on small farms or manors, producing enough food for the inhabitants to live on. There were few towns or cities. Travel was limited. Most people spent their entire lives within a few miles of the place where they were born. The few economic markets were tightly regulated by the nobility.



Why did the Popes and the church attain such important status in the Middle Ages?



Key Note Term

hierarchical—organized or classified according to rank, capacity or authority

How was people's understanding of rights shaped by the economic and social structure of the Middle Ages?

Courtesy of UPI/Bettmann News Photo.

More to Ponder

Take a moment and mull over the following questions. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

1. What is meant by the rights of groups as opposed to the rights of individuals?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of viewing rights as being possessed by individuals rather than groups?
3. Give some contemporary examples of claims for group rights. What arguments can you make for and against these claims?
4. Should certain individuals in our society be given special rights and privileges because they are members of a particular social group?

The Renaissance

During the medieval period, people did not strive to make “progress.” That is, they did not believe that they could make things better for themselves and their children through hard work or individual initiative. Despite these attitudes, medieval cities did develop and prosper. Commerce began to flourish, cities grew, people started to travel more. **Nation-states** began to form. The invention of modern printing methods increased communication and knowledge.

The most important outcome of these changes was the **Renaissance**. The term Renaissance means “re-birth.” It describes a rebirth or revival of intellectual life that began in Italy around the fourteenth century and spread throughout Europe. This new interest was inspired by the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman history, literature, and art, with a view of the world and humanity that was very different from that of medieval Christianity.

Instead of focusing only on other-worldly matters and the quest for salvation, people took an interest in the world around them. They directed their energy toward the possibilities of human achievement in this life rather than the life to come. They expanded their knowledge and began to develop new ideas about the world. Their art and architecture glorified the beauty of the human body; their literature and philosophy explored all aspects of human nature and human creativity.

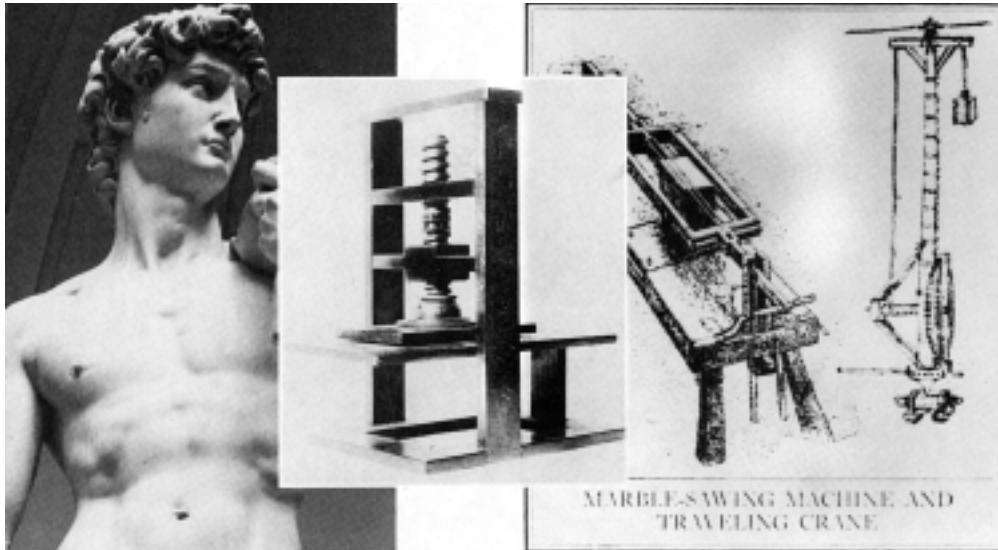
During the Renaissance people began to accept the idea of progress and historical change. In many areas of life, greater importance was placed on the individual than on the class or group into which that individual had been born. People believed they could work to improve their positions in society. The new emphasis on individual opportunity led to an increased interest in the rights of individuals. This interest contributed to a reexamination of the individual’s relationship to religious institutions and governments.

Key Note Term

nation-state—the modern nation as the representative unit of political organization

Key Note Term

Renaissance—the great revival of art, literature, and learning in Europe during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, based on classical sources



How did Michelangelo's statue of David and changes in technology reflect changes in thinking that occurred in the Renaissance?

Courtesy of E.P.G. International.

The Protestant Reformation Advances the Cause of Individual Rights

The Protestant Reformation was a powerful stimulus to modern individualism. The **Reformation** was a religious reform movement that began in the early sixteenth century in Western Europe. It resulted in new ideas about religion, individual rights, and government. Like the Renaissance, the Reformation was a rebirth and rediscovery of certain things. Supporters of the Reformation believed they were returning to the original principles of Christianity.

Medieval society in Western Europe had been dominated by the Church of Rome. Religious reformers, studying the Bible and other ancient religious texts, began to challenge the doctrines, traditions, and practices of the Church of Rome. They believed that the medieval church had become corrupt and had lost sight of the original truths of Christianity. Some critics attempted to reform the church from within, but many Protestant reformers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, established their own churches with the help of **secular governments**.

The Reformation was aided by the invention of the printing press. Books that formerly were scarce now became more available. The Bible was the most important of these books. For centuries the Bible had been printed only in Latin, which few people other than priests could read. Medieval Christians relied on the Church to interpret the word of God for them. During the Reformation, however, Bibles were printed in English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish. Individuals were encouraged to read the Bible in their native language to determine for themselves what it meant. Being able to read the Bible for oneself encouraged greater freedom of conscience.

Key Note Term

Reformation—sixteenth-century religious movement aimed at reforming the Roman Catholic church and resulting in the establishment of Protestant churches

Key Note Term

secular governments—a system of political power not exercised by ecclesiastical bodies or the clergy

Protestant religious doctrine emphasized the direct relationship between each individual believer and God. The result was to reduce the importance of the church and to increase the importance of the individual. All individuals were seen as equal in the eyes of God. Each person is to be respected and held accountable by God as an individual.

The spirit of free inquiry and individual conscience inspired by the Reformation contributed to the development of modern individualism. It also ultimately posed a threat to all established institutions and authority. Some religious reformers soon began to question the authority of the Protestant churches and the governments that supported them. In England, for example, reformers attacked the Church of England for not being Protestant enough. They were called Puritans because they wanted to “purify” the church. Some reformers sought to reform the established church. Others decided to separate from it. Many American colonies were originally settled by people seeking freedom to worship in their own way and new forms of government that would allow this.

The Rise of Modern Nation-States

The modern nation-state’s development was speeded by the forces of change created by the Renaissance and Reformation. There were no nations, as we understand that word today, during the Middle Ages. The power of kings and princes did not reach very far. Power was exercised locally by authorities who usually inherited their power. In theory, at least, all secular governments were subservient to the Church of Rome. They had little authority over church officials and institutions in their territories.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages many of these secular governments were expanding and consolidating their power into independent states. The Reformation helped this development by challenging the Church of Rome. Some states, like England, broke free from the Church of Rome and created their own national churches. Others remained loyal to the **papacy** but reduced the authority of the Church of Rome within their territory.

Key Note Term

papacy—the office or authority of the Pope, the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic church

How did the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the emergence of the modern nation-state make the rise of capitalism possible?

Courtesy of the Fishmongers Society of London.



The rise of the modern nation-state was very important to the development of modern ideas about government and rights. People began to think of themselves as citizens of a particular state or country, with public rights and duties. Political thought began to focus on the question of what kind of government would be best for these states. The modern nation-state also brought with it national legal systems and representative institutions of government.

The New Economic System of Capitalism

Among the forces that helped to break up medieval society and pave the way for the Renaissance was the increase in commercial trade and its expansion over greater distances. Eventually, this growth produced a new economic system called **capitalism**. Capitalism is an economic system in which

- **the means of producing and distributing goods are privately owned and operated for profit in competitive markets**
- **production and distribution are not controlled by the government**

Under capitalism people gained more freedom to choose their occupations, start their own businesses, and own property. People had more control over their lives than had been possible in the Middle Ages.

People were able to pay more attention to their private interests than to the common good. They were encouraged to work to gain property and improve their positions in society. As a result, political and economic power shifted to a newly developed middle class of successful citizens.

How the Renaissance and Reformation Contributed to the Growth of Individual Rights

The Renaissance and Reformation produced a greater emphasis on the importance of the individual than had existed in the Middle Ages or in classical Greece and Rome. The ideas and opinions of individuals were valued. As the Renaissance emphasized individual activity and creativity, the followers of the Protestant Reformation emphasized the relationship between the individual believer and God. The rise of nation-states stimulated new thought about government and rights.

Capitalism translated this new spirit into economic opportunity. More individuals could compete on an equal footing and hope to improve their place in society.



Key Note Term

capitalism—an economic system in which the means of producing and distributing goods privately owned and operated for profit in a competitive market

How did increased interest in scientific study relate to the development of the natural rights philosophy?

Key Note Term

Age of Enlightenment—an intellectual movement of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that celebrated human reason and sought to realize its potential in all areas of human endeavor

The Age of Enlightenment

The natural rights philosophy was a product of what is sometimes called the **Age of Enlightenment**. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that celebrated human reason and sought to realize its potential in all areas of human endeavor. The Age of Enlightenment is also called the Age of Reason.

The worldly interests inspired by the Renaissance stimulated natural science—the study of the natural world and the laws that govern it. This new interest also was encouraged by commercial expansion and voyages of discovery beyond Europe. These voyages brought new knowledge about the natural world and about other cultures.

One advocate of scientific discovery, the English philosopher Francis Bacon, believed in the power of human reason and observation not only to understand nature, but also to control it for humanity's own purposes. "The end of scientific study," he said, "is the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible." The discoveries of scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton seemed to confirm Bacon's faith.

Eventually this spirit of scientific discovery was applied to human nature and society as well. During the Enlightenment people began to apply the method of scientific thinking to the study of society and politics.

The American Founders belonged to the Age of Enlightenment. They believed in the powers of reason and observation to understand the workings of governmental and societal institutions. They thought these powers also would be a guide in ways to improve institutions. With such faith and self-confidence, the Framers of our Constitution thought they could create a new order of government during one summer's deliberations in Philadelphia.

Conclusion

In this lesson you learned how the Founders were influenced by the ideas of classical republicanism: the importance of the Roman Republic and the moral ideal of civic virtue. You examined how these ideas shaped their thinking about what kind of government they wanted to create for the United States.

You learned about the principles of classical republicanism as well as the difficulties the Founders encountered in attempting to apply those principles to the new American nation. You also should understand how classical republicanism differed from the natural rights philosophy in its account of human nature and individual rights. You should be able to explain how James Madison was able to adapt the ideas of classical republicanism, democracy, and civic virtue to American circumstances.

You also examined the influence of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment on the thinking of the Founders. You compared the difference between classical republican and Judeo-Christian ideas about the importance of the individual. You should understand how the Judeo-Christian tradition shaped people's outlook during the Middle Ages, providing one of the bases for modern constitutionalism. You also should be able to explain how the Renaissance, Reformation, rise of capitalism, rise of nationalism, and the Enlightenment led to the development of modern ideas about individual rights.

In the following lesson, you will learn about the British origins of American Constitutionalism.

Lesson Review

1. What is meant by the term “civic virtue”? Give an example of a situation in which someone is expected to show civic virtue.
2. How would you describe the differences between the natural rights philosophy and classical republicanism?
3. How would you describe the difference between the classical republican idea of civic virtue and Judeo-Christian ideas of morality?
4. What was the “Age of Enlightenment” and why is it sometimes called the “Age of Reason”?