

The Evolution of the American Nation and Government

The foundations of the United States as a nation and of its government were laid during the colonial period. The origins of the American government can be seen in the governments of the early colonies. The period immediately preceding the revolution demonstrated the evolution of an American identity from the distinct identity of each colony. It also included the beginnings of the cooperation between the colonies which allowed the United States to come into existence as a nation.

There was great diversity in the governments of the early colonies. Many of the colonies developed as proprietorships governed by single individuals. Each of these colonies had a very different character, which was the result of the beliefs of the person who chartered them. An example of this is Pennsylvania, which had religious freedom and attempted to respect the land rights of the Native Americans. This reflected the Quaker beliefs of William Penn, who received the land for the colony. This was also demonstrated in Maryland, which became a haven for Catholics as a result of the fact that the Calverts, the family who governed it, were Catholics. The greatest similarity between these colonies was that they all had a strong governor, which reflected their origins as grants to individuals.

The colonies which were created by planters to generate a profit developed in a different direction. These colonies had a stronger tradition of democratic government. This is illustrated by the House of Burgesses in Virginia, which was the earliest representative legislature in the British colonies. The House of Burgesses effectively ruled Virginia without outside influence from its creation until it was disbanded immediately before the Revolution. It became firmly entrenched in Virginian government very quickly, as is illustrated by the protest which arose when the king tried to disband it after taking over the colony from its parent company. However,

these colonies developed a much more aristocratic culture than the other colonies. This is demonstrated by the constitution of South Carolina, which created a highly structured class system. Although they were more democratic than some, these colonies were governed by the wealthy, landed aristocracy. This is illustrated through Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, which was an uprising resulting from yeomen farmers' discontent with the aristocratic government.

The third group of colonies were those of the Massachusetts Bay area, which all evolved from the Puritan colony of Massachusetts. This colony was founded by the Puritans as a settlement away from the "corrupting" culture of England. These colonies developed a very democratic tradition. The colonial government of Massachusetts was headed by a governor, who was elected by an assembly every year. The colony was also governed locally by representative assemblies. This democratic tradition was the result of the Puritan idea of government by God's elect. These colonies had suffrage for any male member of the Puritan church, which included most adult men in the colony.

The governments of the original colonies had many ideas which influenced the formation of the American nation. One major example of this is the concept of the citizens' rights. This idea descended from the rights of English citizens granted by the Magna Carta, which were part of the underpinnings of every colonial government. Another important idea was the concept of the charter and constitution. The colonies were all founded on charters granted by the British crown, which were the basis for the government of the colony. The colonies came to view these charters as a contract with the king which could not be altered without their permission. This concept eventually developed into the idea of a constitution, which is central to American government on every level. A third example is the establishment of representative governments. All of the colonies had elected legislatures which made laws and taxed the colonies, and some had elected governors. Although the conditions for suffrage varied greatly, the

foundations of the elected government of the American Constitution were present throughout the British colonies. Finally, most of the colonies were headed by a strong governor. This position evolved into the office of the president in the Constitution.

The early colonies were all founded and governed independently, and as a result they all thought of themselves as independent entities. There were few connections between the early colonies, and they developed along different lines. This was because each colony was founded for a different purpose and in a different manner. The colonies of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina were founded by rich, aristocratic men in order to produce a profit from cash crops such as tobacco and rice. The Massachusetts Bay colonies, such as Massachusetts and Rhode Island, were founded by groups which left England in order to leave begin a new society away from the old influences in England. There were also colonies which were given to individuals for their service to the king, such as Pennsylvania and Maryland. Finally, some of the colonies were founded for military reasons. New York, which was conquered from the Dutch, and Georgia, which was founded to protect the English colonies from Spanish Florida, are examples of this. The wide variety in the purposes of their origins led each colony to develop with entirely different traditions, which eventually fused into the American culture. However, for much of colonial history, they were separate entities.

The American identity and concept of government evolved towards an independent, democratic ideal through the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century. During this period, the British government followed a policy of salutary neglect towards the colonies, allowing them to govern themselves with almost no outside interference. As a result, the colonies became used to this self-government. Salutary neglect also led to the concept of direct representation, where each member of the legislature represented the group that had directly elected him.

The emergence of an American identity began with the French and Indian War of the mid-eighteenth century. This war led American and British soldiers to fight alongside each other, and had a profound impact on the American perception of the British. It made the American colonists begin to realize how different they were from the British. The behavior of the British soldiers toward the colonists also made them realize that the British looked down on them. These factors began to create a sense of distance between Britain and the American colonies.

The British taxes that were enacted as a result of the French and Indian War demonstrated differences that had evolved between Britain and the colonies. The British concept of government included virtual representation, which meant that the British Parliament had the power to act for all subjects of the British Empire. Virtual representation contrasted strongly with the colonies' theory of direct representation, and it led the colonies to resent the taxation policies of England. This was clearly demonstrated by the strong protests which resulted from the enactment of the Stamp Act. The act broke with the tradition of colonial self-government, and it threatened the colonists rights as citizens by stating that violators of the act would be tried in a military court. The American colonists' reaction to this act demonstrated the emergence of the American identity, as is shown by Otis' The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved and by the Virginia Stamp Act Resolves. Although these writings did not assert that the colonies should be free from British rule, they stated that the colonies had rights to some self-government and control of taxation. This identity became more clearly defined as the British continued to enact taxes on the colonies. This is illustrated by Dickinson's Letters From a Pennsylvania Farmer, which was written in response to the Townshend Acts and which stated that Parliament could only tax for certain reasons. Paine's Common Sense and the Declaration of Independence illustrate the full emergence of this American identity.

As the attitude of the colonies became more independent from Britain, they became

more closely connected. The beginning of this connection is illustrated in the actions in protest of the Stamp Act. The calling of an inter-colonial congress to petition for the repeal of the act and the creation of the inter-colonial Sons of Liberty to coordinate protests signified that the colonies were beginning to think of themselves as a unit and to function in unison. These two actions demonstrated only the beginnings of a formal connection among the colonies since the inter-colonial congress had one purpose and since the Sons of Liberty were disbanded after the Stamp Act crisis was resolved. The revival of the Sons of Liberty as a permanent organization after the passage of the Townshend Acts and the establishment of Committees of Correspondence throughout the colonies following the Boston Massacre demonstrated increasing connections among and within the colonies. The calling of the two Continental Congresses and the establishment of the Continental Association demonstrated that the colonies had developed the connections which later allowed them to be unified into one nation.

The foundations of the American nation and government were created during the colonial period. The colonial governments impacted the American concept of government and its role. This period also allowed an American identity and a sense of unity to develop within the colonies. The colonial period allowed for the development of all of the ideas and connections that were involved in the creation of Constitution and of the United States as nation.