

In this 1857 painting, William Walcutt imagines New Yorkers tearing down the statue of King George III at Bowling Green in Manhattan



An Intellectual Revolution

The Age of Enlightenment stirs up radical ideas about man's place in society, giving birth to a liberating new proposition: **the Rights of Man**

IMAGINE A WELL-REASONED ARGUMENT AGAINST FAMILY, free speech, the ownership of private property and any other values you believe to be right and just—and you will have some idea of how radical the statement “All men are created equal” sounded to 18th century ears. We are taught to think of the American Revolution as a political revolt that led to an outright war. Such uprisings would never have begun, much less succeeded, had they not been sparked by an intellectual insurrection that lit fires around the world in the mid-1700s and continues to burn to this day.

Europeans of the 1700s thought of themselves as, above all else, supremely modern. They had achieved advances in science and culture that would have been unimaginable to their

forebears of only a few generations earlier. All this progress, it was believed, rested upon a hard-won recognition of the natural order of things: God, who had created the world, selected the ablest and worthiest men to govern it as kings, while everyone else accepted their divinely ordained stations in this life and worked humbly for reward in the next. This social hierarchy was mirrored by a religious hierarchy that answered the needs of the soul. Acceptance of this order distinguished humans from animals and made it possible to know the mind of God by unlocking secrets like the movement of the planets. But rejecting this order (as the American colonists are doing in the illustration above) threatened to return humanity to chaos and squalor of the Dark Ages.

Men
Ben Fra
ued rea
dition t
self: su
peasant
God m
mediate
earth, k
denly fa
are “enc
(rather
tle need
ister th
Inspi
ophy” p
de Mon
lighten
there w
gesting
get you
anointe

“The art of government is to make two-thirds of the people pay all it

possi

possibly can for the benefit of the other third."—Voltaire

In fact, the revolutions in science were being paced, if more slowly, by an evolution in politics. Beginning with the Magna Carta, the 1215 document in which English nobles forced King John to relinquish his claims to absolute rule, and progressing through Britain's 1689 Bill of Rights (in which Parliament asserted, among other things, the freedom of British subjects to bear arms, petition the King, elect their own representatives and refuse to pay taxes to which those representatives had not consented), power was slowly but inexorably trickling down to ever larger numbers of people.

As these two forces had converged, the skeptical inquiry that was driving scientists spilled over into politics, and the dam broke. In 1690, the British philosopher John Locke (from whom Jefferson would later borrow so freely that he was sometimes accused of plagiarism) would write in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* about the universal right to "life, liberty and property." In 1748, the French scholar Montesquieu wrote in *The Spirit of Laws* that governmental power ought to be divided between those who make laws (the legislature), those who enforce them (the executive) and those who interpret them (judges)—and that these three branches should be independent of one another. By 1762, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Social Contract*, was insisting that governments derive their powers from the consent of the people they govern.

In Europe, these musings were, at least for the first half of the 18th century, largely theoretical. The weight of law, tradition and all the armed power of established states rendered such heresies harmless. But in Britain's American colonies, the situation was very different. Here, a confident, self-reliant population led by a well-educated, affluent elite was poised to exploit the opportunities offered by a vast wilderness they had scarcely begun to explore, at precisely the moment when Enlightenment thinking was reaching full flower. It is difficult to imagine a more fertile breeding ground for what followed.

When the great French skeptic Voltaire embraced Ben Franklin in Paris in 1778, they were hailed as twin prophets of a new age of reason. Indeed, only six years after the end of the American Revolution, an uprising that drew inspiration both from Enlightenment thinkers and from



Locke



Voltaire



Men like Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin and others who valued reason more highly than tradition threatened civilization itself, suggesting that princes and peasants were equal in the eyes of God meant that the traditional mediators between heaven and earth, kings and priests, were suddenly far less important, perhaps entirely obsolete. If all men are "endowed by their creator" with certain inalienable rights (rather than granted rights by their King), they would have little need for middlemen in robes (royal or clerical) to administer those rights.

Inspired by radical advances in science and "natural philosophy" pioneered by Isaac Newton, René Descartes and Michel de Montaigne in the 16th and 17th centuries, thinkers of the Enlightenment were predisposed to question everything. But there were, at first, strict limits on the sedition of scholars: suggesting that the earth moved around the sun might no longer get you burned at the stake, but implying that the King was not anointed by God could still cost you your head.

the U.S. example but that followed a very different course, took place in Voltaire's France, which adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789. Even Britain began heaving to the U.S. course, continuing its steady march toward increasing individual freedoms.

In the minds of America's Founding Fathers, the demarcation between the revolution of ideas they fomented and the battlefield victory that followed remained distinct. As John Adams would write to Thomas Jefferson in 1815, "the War ... was no part of the Revolution. It was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected ... years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington."

ENLARGED: RIGHT: STOKR MONYAGE—GETTY IMAGES