

The enlightenment research paper ap us history essay

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The Impact of the Enlightenment in Colonial America Cristel Mendieta Lincoln International Academy Advanced Placement United States History Mr.

Roger Brady September 12, 2012 Abstract This research paper was written for the Advanced Placement United States History class taught by Mr. Roger Brady. It focuses on the rise of the ideas of the Enlightenment and how these ideas were relevant in the American Revolution, and the creation of the modern American Society. It also provides a throughout explanation of what is the Enlightenment, who are its main exponents, and how the ideas of the Enlightenment spread. Lastly, it also depicts how the colonists were mistreated and mocked by the British Empire before the ideas of the Enlightenment hit America and cause the shift in the mindset of the Colonial leaders who would command the Revolutionary War for independence in 1776.

The Impact of the Enlightenment in the North American Colonies The Enlightenment, or the age of reason, started out as a cultural movement of intellectuals in Europe during the eighteenth century. The main purpose of this movement was to achieve knowledge and understanding of life through the use of science rather than the use of tradition and religion. The ideas of the Enlightenment opposed greatly superstition, intolerance, and abuse by the church and state subsequently placed a heavy emphasis on science, logic, and reason in order to understand the natural and human world and how to make government and society more fair, free, equitable, and humane. The Enlightenment came after the Dark Ages, so it literally means to bring light to the thinking and analysis of most intellectuals. At the time,

intellectuals and philosophers did not see the magnitude and the relevance the ideas of the Enlightenment would bring to the North American Colonies which resided a sea away. Always when new things come from England to America there is a huge commotion and changes in cultural aspects. In the 1960s it was the Beatles that drove all the ladies and the people of America crazy, but long before that, in the eighteenth century people went crazy for another British product; however, this product was not music, it was freedom.

It is ironic to think that the freedom that all Americans desired came from the same empire which oppressed them, England. " Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. " Says Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and that's what the colonists felt. Of course, they were happy to be part of the largest empire of the world; nonetheless there was a newly born sense of patriotism and love for America when the ideas of the Enlightenment invaded colonial America. General Ideas of the Enlightenment The Enlightenment primarily centralized on a shift of mind, for most people. Now people saw things in a different way and more and more people believed the ideas of Enlightenment which encompassed: Rationalism, which is the belief that knowledge can be obtained through reason; empiricism, greatly used by scientists from the time and still in the twenty first century, the belief that knowledge can be obtained from experience thus the use of the scientific method can lead to the drawing of irrefutable conclusions; secularism, the separation of religious and spiritual beliefs from civic affairs; the idea that all the concepts of the Enlightenment can be applied to anyone, whether rich,

poor, black or white: universalism; equality, the idea that all people in society should have the same right whether they are black, white, male or female; the concept that places a larger focus on each individual and removes the barriers to achieve the highest amount of freedom for everyone, individualism; the power to exercise choice and make decisions without political, social or natural inference, freedom; the acknowledgement of other ideas and opinions regarding relevant matters without persecution and negativity, nonetheless it does not imply acceptance, toleration; and lastly, progress, which is the development of society that is considered to be more sophisticated, beneficial and complex than the previous state (Niles 2010).

The shift of mind on which the Enlightenment also focused on other ideologies which were more applicable with governments and societies in general; an example of this is in the belief that democracy, a type of government in which most of its functionaries are controlled and chosen by the people, is the form of government that should be practiced. And, even though, the Enlightenment encourages secularity it also approves of Deism, the theological belief that the universe was created by a higher entity, and the acceptance of the Natural Law which is an innate set of rights and freedom given by God, or nature, that cannot be taken away or restricted by the government. The Enlightenment also supported the Social Contract Theory, an agreement between the government and the people where the people give up some of their freedoms to live under the protection of a government (Niles, 2010).

These ideals and theories would in a near future be the moldings and basis of a newly born independent American Nation. The Philosophes and the Enlightenment Few educators in history have made such a profound effect on the shape and molding of the future as John Locke. His approach on education and use of the science to prove his ideals not only shaped the ideals of the Enlightenment but European and American life itself (Trish, 2009). Locke disagreed with the relevance of ancient Greek philosophies in modern education and supported the use of modern writings for philosophical advice such as the ones by Rene Descartes. Locke's ideals mainly centralized on those that a government should listen to its people, thus, care for the welfare of others.

He also believed that the human mind is blank at birth, meaning that we are all originally good but it is our surroundings that detour us from that rightful path (ThinkQuest, 2008). John Locke is considered the father of the Enlightenment because of his indispensable additions to the dogmatic ideas by which the Enlightenment was built on, and soon enough these ideals had a close symbiotic relationship with those of the Enlightenment and before anybody could know it, they had arrived in America and riots, boycotts and desires of revolution had started (Popovitch, 2009). Great intellectuals such as Pierre Bayle, Isaac Newton, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baron de Montesquieu, Denis Diderot, amongst others played a huge role in the Enlightenment as well. Isaac Newton made great contributions to the scientific and mathematical fields; Montesquieu wrote a book based on how a system of checks and balances, money, should be separated from the

government thus he proposed that governments should be separated into three branches: A legislative branch to make laws, an executive branch to enforce the laws and provide protection and a judicial branch to settle disputes.

All of these intellectuals are called the Philosophes because they made great contributions to modern society, and modern political and economic systems (Niles, 2010). The Spread of the Enlightenment The ideas of the Enlightenment quickly gained popularity and spread through all of Europe and America. Salons, coffeehouses and debating societies in which these revolutionary ideas were preached quickly sprang up all of Europe and most of them were open to any type of public. Nobody was excluded from the new ideas of equality and humanism. The spread of the Enlightenment in Europe led to the rise of scientific academies, like the Academy of Sciences of Paris. During this period the printing press and the invention of Johannes Gutenberg gained popularity and everything started to be announced in the newspapers.

Most authors started publishing their views on the newspapers throughout poems; the literacy rates were on the rise and eventually these newspapers got to America (Niles 2010). The American Colonies Before the Enlightenment Before the Colonies were influenced by the Enlightenment, there were numerous economic, political and social issues, not only in Colonial America, but most specifically the relationship between the British Empire and its Colonies. Since the French and Indian War had just happened, Britain was in a lot of debt, so they decided to exploit the American Colonies

so they could create greater revenue to pay off the debt and regain economic stability. The debt was so huge that it made the British government fall apart, thus it led to conflicts that ultimately caused the Revolutionary war (Kindig, 1995).

The British government decided to impose a series of taxes or navigation acts on the colonists to pay off the debt (Radojini; Drivas, 1997). This angered greatly the colonists because they felt they were being taxed without their consent. It all began with the Molasses act, which was later replaced with the Sugar Act. Eventually everything had a tax, but these taxes were not only imposed, but they were secretly placed on the goods, which, unsettled the colonists even more. After the war, the Policy of Salutary neglect was repealed and now the mainland paid more attention to the colonies, and subsequently was harsher when it came to paying taxes. Discontent dwelled among the attitude of every colonist for they had taxation without representation (Koeller, 1997).

The colonial discontent did not rest, there were a series of boycotts and riots in order to stop the taxation. However, the act which had a greater impact on the colonists was the Stamp Act, which meant that every printed document had to have a British stamp on it in order to be valid. Since the stamp was just an excuse to get money from the colonies there were Stamp Act riots which desired to repeal the act, and it eventually created the Stamp Act Congress that officially rejected the idea of the Stamp Act. In order to get people to support the ideas of anti-British taxation, the colonists started printing propaganda on the newspapers which encouraged the colonial

opposition to the Stamp Act and stressed the loss of rights of the colonists (Koeller, 1997). Then, the ideas of the Enlightenment reached America and all changed. The mindsets shifted and all colonists wanted was one thing: independence (Niles, 2010). The American Colonies After the Enlightenment After the Enlightenment reached and spread throughout America many things changed in the colonial society not only ideologically but politically, economically, and socially as well (Sage, 2007). The Enlightenment was of great importance in determining almost every aspect of Colonial America, most notably in politics, religion and economics (Smith, 2011).

The biggest importance of the Enlightenment in America is that it provided the philosophical basis of the American Revolution. It was the ideas of the enlightenment which motivated the American founding fathers such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson or George Washington to fight against the British tyranny. John Locke's idea that a government must be democratic and must listen to what the people want was one of the major motives by which the American leaders upheld their beliefs. They desired to be the living proof of what Locke was expressing (Smith, 2010). When the Enlightenment got to America, most colonists opened their eyes to reason and started analyzing their surroundings and what England was actually doing. The Navigation Acts, taxation without representation, and oppression are just numerous things that the British would implement to have control of the colonies, but as the minds of the colonies got enlightened the British had less and less power over them. All the colonists wanted to do was to be able to control their own way of living, and to choose their governments. After the

Americans felt the British taxation and limitation driven by the new ideas of freedom, and equality the Revolutionary War began (HistoryChannel, 2010).

There were many things that led to the actual Revolutionary War, but the main thing was the Boston Tea Party. When the Americans dressed up as Natives and threw the tea over one side as a sign of protest and rejection of the British goods only meant one thing “ we don’t want you anymore”. The Americans were tired, and so, the American Revolution began. Now people had the idea that they were able to rule themselves, thus, the aristocracy was not the only class who deserved to rule and to be on top (Niles, 2010).

The middle, and the lower classes should also play an important role in politics, thus help choose in a democratic or popular way a new ruler. One of the things in which the Enlightenment played a very important role is the Declaration of Independence. This document expressed the freedom and the rights that all American citizens would have, thus it expressed the new form of government that the nation would have, inspired by John Locke, democracy. It would be a form of government in which the government would be chosen by the people and for the people. Also, Montesquieu’s idea of a balanced government was adopted and it is still practiced today. The United States of America today consists of three governmental branches, a judicial, a legislative, and an executive branch. Without the philosophical basis of the Enlightenment the United States of America would be a completely different country.

It would lack its sense of freedom, equality, and its political ideas based on John Locke and Montesquieu. The American Revolution became much more than an uprising against the British Empire, it turned out to be the blueprint of a democratic society and this blueprint was drawn with the pencil of enlightened minds (Sage, 2007). Not only were the American colonies influenced politically but economically and spiritually as well. Americans believed in the centrality of economics to politics, meaning that a society's well-being depends solely on how the economy is structured, meaning that how the money is structured and handled is more important than who is at the top of the government for people have free will and are able to make important decisions by themselves. Also, there was a shift in the spiritual aspect in the life of Americans. People no longer worried if they were fine with God, they wanted to be fine with themselves. Humans were now the center of everything; art, and literature now focused on humane subjects rather than in religious depictions.

Society was now completely different and it was all because of the significance the Enlightenment had had over the mindset of the Americans. Legacy From feudal lords, manorialism, and extreme respect for God to democracy, free trade, and secularism. That is the extreme shift that the Enlightenment occasioned.

The Enlightenment is one of the most important happenings when it comes to the revolution of ideas and principles for everything changed and what was feared turned out to be positive for society. As John Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, and a handful of other philosophers and intellectuals who

played an important role in the Enlightenment proved, fear of the unknown must be replaced with curiosity because knowledge and progress will only come from what is not feared. If the Enlightenment had not occurred, or if it maybe had occurred before or later the American society and nation would not be what it is right now. The timing of the Enlightenment was impeccable because it triggered that shift in mind and that desire to obtain freedom; to build a righteous nation without the oppression of the British Empire. It not only defined the American Revolution, but it defined hundreds of years of political affairs and decisions because nowadays American presidents still take their decisions based on the dogmatic and philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment.

We are still able to see the effects of the Enlightenment and the colossal influence that it has had on our society. Even though the Enlightenment originated in Europe and it is there were it was widely spread and preached, the main demonstrations of it took place in America because it was the American leaders like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington who followed these ideals which led to the Revolutionary war and subsequently to the birth of the United States of America. References 1. Channel, History (2010). America the Story of Us: American Revolution. America the Story of Us. October 11, 2012.

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