

# Influences on the Declaration of Independence and the American War for Independence

**Enlightenment** - a social and political movement originated during the late 17<sup>th</sup> - and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, in which science, reason, and logic became the foundations for gaining knowledge. During this movement, principles such as logic and reason were applied to all aspects of society, including government. This change in thinking inspired many philosophers to begin to question the manner in which countries and societies were governed at the time.

**Natural Rights** (also called *inalienable rights*) are rights that are not contingent upon the laws, customs, or beliefs or a particular society or polity (i.e., *life, liberty, property, pursuit of happiness*)

**Social Contract** describes any series of implied agreements by which people form civil governments and maintain a social order. The basic principle of the social contract implies that the people give up some rights to a government and other authority in order to receive or jointly preserve social order.

**John Locke** was a British philosopher and author of *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1688). In this work Locke gives us a theory of natural law and natural rights, which he uses to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate civil governments, and to argue for the legitimacy of revolt against tyrannical governments.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** - author of *The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right* (1762). He shared many of the same beliefs as Locke, concerning natural rights and the Social Contract.

**Thomas Hobbes** - Enlightenment thinker, author, philosopher. (*Leviathan*, 1651)

In his book, *Leviathan*, Hobbes speculates what life would be like without government, a condition which he calls the state of nature. In that state, each person would have a right, or license, to everything in the world. This inevitably leads to conflict, a "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*).

To escape this state of war, men in the state of nature agree to enter into a social contract and establish a civil society. According to Hobbes, society is a population beneath a sovereign authority, to whom all individuals in that society cede their natural rights for the sake of protection. Any abuses of power by this authority are to be accepted as the price of peace. However, he also states that in severe cases of abuse, rebellion is expected. In particular, the doctrine of separation of powers is rejected: the sovereign must control civil, military, judicial and ecclesiastical powers.

**Great Awakening** - a religious movement that became widespread in the American colonies in the 1730's and 1740's

Throughout the Great Awakening, a number of things started to happen within the minds of the colonists. The rural commoners, interested in social equality, began to take hold and migrated to new denominations of Christianity that began to emerge in the colonies. They began to question the authority of church leaders and rebel against their own church ministers.

The major effect of the Awakening was a rebellion against authoritarian religious rule which spilled over into other areas of colonial life. Amidst the growing population of the colonies within the 18th Century and mass public gatherings, charismatic personalities such as George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent rolled through to deliver their messages.

The Great Awakening in the colonies did not form around the concept of religious freedom, but nevertheless the ideas it produced opposed the notion of a single truth or a single church. As preachers visited town after town, sects began to break off larger churches and a number of Protestant denominations sprouted (i.e., *Methodist*, *Baptist*). The older groups that dominated the early colonies - the Puritans and the Anglicans - eventually began a drastic downward trend in popularity. Although they accounted for about 40% of American congregations as late as 1760, that number eventually dropped to under 2.5% by 1790.

The social effect of development of new denominations was not a "breaking up" of communities, but a unifying drive that helped to create a "national consciousness" [awareness].

The effect of Great Awakening unity was an attitude that went against the deferential thinking that consumed English politics and religion. Rather than believing that God's will was necessarily interpreted by the monarch or his bishops, the colonists viewed themselves as also capable of performing the task. The chain of authority no longer ran from God to ruler to people, but from God to people to ruler.

**Government as Contract** - Another effect of the Great Awakening on colonial culture was the growth of the notion of state rule as a contract with the people.

Parishioners during the revival gained an understanding of covenants with their churches as contractual schemes; they argued that each believer owed the church their obedience, and the churches in turn owed their congregants the duty to be faithful to the Gospel. Parishioners therefore reserved the right to dissolve the covenant and to sever ties with the church without prior permission. This notion of covenant was a popular one in Puritan society and reflected a common biblical understanding of association. Present in the Mayflower Compact and later forming an ideological basis for breaking from Great Britain, the notion of covenant grew to link religion and politics in the colonies.

The ideals of Puritanical covenant theology were manifested in the "social compact" of the Declaration of Independence.

Under this theory, implicit in the Declaration, disassociated individuals in the "state of nature" agree to live and be bound together under consensual government. With the frequency by which believers broke away from larger churches to form splinter groups, the colonists must have been accustomed to separating themselves from larger institutions.