

ANCIENT MODELS OF GOVERNMENT

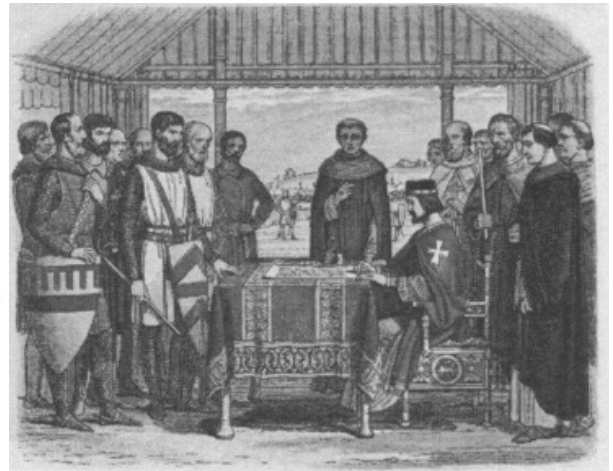
Long before the American Revolution, earlier governments laid a foundation for the United States' political system. The ancient **Greeks** practiced direct democracy, allowing each eligible citizen to have a vote. Later, the ancient **Romans** introduced the idea of a republic. Unlike a direct democracy, in which all qualified citizens vote on laws and public policies, in a republic, elected representatives select key leaders and vote on the people's behalf. The framers of the US Constitution ultimately combined elements of both when structuring the United States government.



Roman Senate

BRITISH INFLUENCES

In 1215 AD, a group of English nobles forced King John I to sign the **Magna Carta** or "Great Charter." The document introduced **limited government** to England. Limited government simply means that the government has to obey a set of laws; it is *limited* in what it can do. The Magna Carta granted nobles (upper-class Englishmen) various rights and prevented the king from imposing taxes without the consent of a council. This council eventually became **Parliament**. Parliament established an example of representative democracy that greatly influenced the British colonies. When the United States drafted its Constitution, it included a similar legislative body: Congress.



Signing the Magna Carta

In 1689, the **English Bill of Rights** gave Parliament more power. Under the English Bill of Rights, the monarch could not interfere with Parliamentary elections, nor could he, or she, impose taxes without Parliament's consent. It also granted citizens the right to a speedy trial, outlawed cruel and unusual punishment, and granted citizens the right to petition the government. The US Constitution later guaranteed many of these same rights.

THE MAYFLOW COMPACT



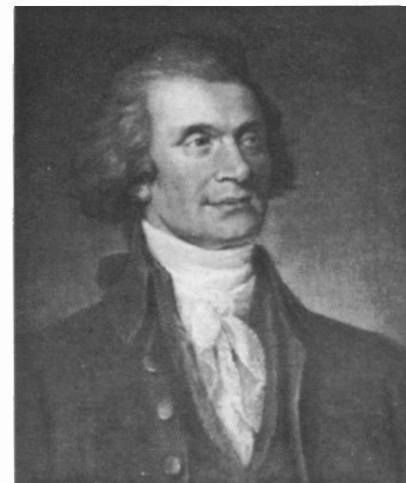
Signing the Mayflower Compact

In New England, the **Mayflower Compact** set up guidelines for self government. The Puritan settlers at Plymouth, Massachusetts, drafted this document in 1620 while still on board the Mayflower (the ship that brought them to Massachusetts from Europe). It established an elected legislature and stated that the government got its power from the people of the colony. It expressed the colonists' desire to be ruled by a local government, rather than England.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE



Second Continental Congress



Young Thomas Jefferson

In May 1775, the Second Continental Congress assembled to discuss how to deal with the outbreak of fighting between the colonies and Great Britain. The following year, in June 1776, delegates to the assembly declared independence from England and appointed a committee to write a statement giving the reasons for this separation. One of the committee's members, a young delegate named Thomas Jefferson, drafted the statement. Jefferson was a man greatly influenced by the Enlightenment and the ideas of Englishman, John Locke. The Enlightenment was a time that featured new ideas about government. Locke was one of the most famous people to come out of this period. Locke believed that people were born with certain **natural rights** that no government could take away. These rights include life, liberty, and property. However, for the good of society, citizens agree to give up certain freedoms and empower governments to maintain order. The right to govern comes from the people. If a government fails to respect its citizens' rights or to fulfill its proper role, then that government should be replaced. Many colonial leaders used Locke's views to justify the American Revolution.

On July 4, 1776, the delegates to the Second Continental Congress formally adopted the **Declaration of Independence**. Appealing to the belief that governments get their power from the people, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that the United States of America was forevermore a free nation. It asserted the principle of **egalitarianism** (the idea that all men are created equal) and proclaimed that men are born with certain **unalienable rights** (natural rights that government cannot take away). Among these rights are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The Declaration of Independence claimed that Great Britain failed to fulfill its duty to respect and uphold these rights. It ends with a list of complaints against the king and states the colonies’ right to self-government as a free nation. Sadly, while the Declaration proclaimed equality and freedom, the new nation did not extend the same rights to everyone. Women and while males without property could not vote. Native Americans were not considered citizens and the government often took their land by force. African Americans continued to live in slavery for roughly another century.

ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION AND SHAYS’ REBELLION

After declaring independence, the American states did not want to give too much power to a national government. They preferred a confederation. A confederation is a form of government in which the states maintain a great deal of independence while being loosely unified as a nation. For this reason, the **Second Continental Congress** (legislative body that declared independence on July 4, 1776) adopted the **Articles of Confederation**. Finally ratified (approved) in 1781, this document failed because it did not give enough power to the federal (national) government. In order for any law passed by Congress to be final, at least nine of the thirteen states had to agree. Since the states often had different interests, such agreement was rare. Also, the Articles did not grant Congress the power to impose taxes. The federal government had to ask the states for money. This was not very effective and made it impossible to administer the government and provide for a national defense.



Shays’ Rebellion

Change finally came after **Shays’ Rebellion** in 1786. Following the revolution, the United States experienced an economic crisis. The value of US currency was very low. Falling farm prices left many farmers unable to repay loans. At the same time, in order to pay war debts, the state of Massachusetts raised taxes (the national government could not impose taxes, but state governments could). Outraged, a Massachusetts farmer and Revolutionary War veteran named Daniel Shays led farmers in a rebellion. Without a strong national government, Massachusetts was forced to deal with the revolt on its own. Shays’ rebellion made it clear that a more

powerful central government was needed to deal with the nation’s problems. In 1787, leaders called a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation.