Primary Source Analysis #1: Revolutionary Ideas Take Hold

The American Revolution was not merely a war for independence from England, but also a revolution of ideas. In 1776 Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence boldly pronounced the “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal” and “they are endowed by their creator” with the natural and “inalienable” rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Liberty and freedom became a rallying cry of the Revolution, yet large portions of the population continued to be denied essential freedoms. Whether the Founding Fathers intended to or not, the stirring ideas of the Revolution led to a yearning for greater freedom in the new United States.

Read the following primary source documents and consider how revolutionary ideas emerged during the period 1776-1787. Then, using the documents, and your knowledge of the period 1776-1787, draft a unified and coherent 5-paragraph essay that answers the following question:

To what extent did the American Revolution spark changes in American government and society?

Primary Source #1: Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams (March 1776)


...I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would ‘Remember the Ladies’, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

Primary Source #2: The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom (1778)


Be it enacted by General Assembly that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion...

Primary Source #3: Woodcut of Patriot Woman, Marblehead Massachusetts (1779)

*Source:* New York Historical Society
Resolved, That it be recommended to the Governing Powers of the States of South Carolina and Georgia, to consider of the Necessity, and Utility of arming [if they shall with Congress think it expedient to take measures for immediately] raising a force of able bodied Negroes, either for filling up the continental Battalions of those States, or for forming separate Corps, to be commanded by white Commissioned and NonCommissioned Officers, the commissioned officers to be appointed by the said governing Powers respectively, or for both purposes.

Resolved, That it be recommended to the states of South Carolina and Georgia, if they shall think the same expedient, to take measures immediately for raising three thousand able bodied negroes.

That the said negroes be formed into separate corps as battalions, according to the arrangements adopted for the main army, to be commanded by white commissioned and non commissioned officers. . . .

Resolved, That congress will make provision for paying the proprietors of such negroes as shall be inlisted for the service of the United States during the war, a full compensation for the property at a rate not exceeding one thousand dollars for each active able bodied negro man of standard size, not exceeding thirty five years of age, who shall be so inlisted and pass muster.

That no pay or bounty be allowed to the said negroes, but that they be cloathed and subsisted at the expence of the United States.

That every negro who shall well and faithfully serve as a soldier to the end of the present war, and shall then return his arms, be emancipated and receive the sum of fifty dollars.

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Primary Source #5: The Northwest Ordinance (1787)

....It is hereby ordained and declared by the authority aforesaid, That the following articles shall be considered as articles of compact between the original States and the people and States in the said territory and forever remain unalterable, unless by common consent, to wit:

Article 1. No person, demeaning himself in a peaceable and orderly manner, shall ever be molested on account of his mode of worship or religious sentiments, in the said territory.

Article 2. The inhabitants of the said territory shall always be entitled to the benefits of the writ of habeas corpus, and of the trial by jury; of a proportionate representation of the people in the legislature; and of judicial proceedings according to the course of the common law. All persons shall be bailable, unless for capital offenses, where the proof shall be evident or the presumption great. All fines shall be moderate; and no cruel or unusual punishments shall be inflicted. No man shall be deprived of his liberty or property, but by the judgment of his peers or the law of the land; and, should the public exigencies make it necessary, for the common preservation, to take any person’s property, or to demand his particular services, full compensation shall be made for the same. And, in the just preservation of rights and property, it is understood and declared, that no law ought ever to be made, or have force in the said territory, that shall, in any manner whatever, interfere with or affect private contracts or engagements, bona fide, and without fraud, previously formed.

Article 3. Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged...

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Article 6. There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: Provided, always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.