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12 November 2019

The American Political Thought

There should be no doubt that the American Revolution was an unprecedented historic event based on the ideals of Age of Enlightenment. The political system of democracy itself was untested at the time. Therefore, historical status of the American founding father as revolutionaries and state builders cannot be ruled out of the study of American political thought. It was their interpretation of ideas for the liberals like John Locke that founded the political thought that made the first government that was "With the people, for the people, and by the people" as Abraham Lincoln stated many years after the constitution of the united states of America was concocted and implemented. To understand the evolution of American political thought we need to take trip through history and understand the politicians that shaped and perfected a crude idea that was never tested before.

**The Rights of the Colonists by Samuel Adams (1772)**

After the British helped the Americans Colonists to defend themselves against their enemies, there was an idea that the Britishers cannot rule the colonies efficiently since they lived across the sea and are therefore not particularly aware of the problem faced by colonists. This idea, combined with ruthless taxes imposed by the crown led the leader of the Patriotic Resistance, Samuel Adams to come up with a pamphlet called "The Rights of the Colonists" (page 108). This pamphlet claimed that the Americans had right to same privileges enjoyed by subjects born in Britain. Although this pamphlet did not call for independence in direct terms, yet its importance cannot be ruled out as it was the first step by the Americans in direction of seeking their independence. This can be proved by the fact that when Adams was elected to the Continental Congress in 1774, he was hailed as the champion of American Independence by his fellow politicians.

**Common Sense by Thomas Paine (1776)**

The ideas presented in Adams’ pamphlet soon led to the writing of a new pamphlet that expressly gave the idea of the independence of the original thirteen colonies. This pamphlet called “Common Sense” (page 131) was written by Thomas Paine on January 10th, 1776. Paine gave a series of political reasons why the British were unfit to colonies in a clear and persuasive argument. The pamphlet openly encouraged the colonists to rise against the Crown. This paper is considered very important as it is seen as the official beginning of the American Revolution. The main substance of this pamphlet made a highly convincing case for independence of the American colonists, giving people some serious food for thought at the time. The pamphlet was largely inspired by Adams’ pamphlet as the essence of argument for both papers was the acquisition of rights of the oppressed colonists. It was sold and distributed extensively in the colonies yet name of the writer was kept secret at the time to avoid persecution by the British rulers. It should be noted that this pamphlet is the most widely disturbed and sold American publication (till 2006) and it is still discussed and printed today.

**Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson (1776)**

Not soon after the pamphlets presented by Adams and Paine, the Continental Congress asked Thomas Jefferson and his fellows to draw up a Declaration of Independence (page 151). The main purpose of this declaration was to explain to the masses why the ideas presented by Adams and Paine were needed to be implemented for their good. The paper explained that the British have not given them their birthrights and the only way forward was independence of the colonist, as argued by Adams and Paine before him. The difference was that this concept was no longer treated as an idea. The paper, after its approval on July 4th, 1776, declared colonists free of the rule of the British Crown. The famous concepts of "all men are created equal" were first presented in the paper which was not as commonplace as they are in present times. This paper was the official start of the armed struggle against King George, which was brewing steadily after the Crown implemented a series of brutal taxes on the locals. Hence the concept of "No taxation without representation" was finally taking shape of a rebellion due to lack of adherence to the pleas of the colonists.

**The Constitution of the United States by Alexander Hamilton (1787)**

In 1787, ten years after winning the War of Independence, the constitutional convention was called by the founding fathers of the United States to draw up a constitution that would help in governance of the land as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson’s declaration of Independence. Alexander Hamilton represented the state of New York in the session (page 170). His main task was to revise the Article of the Confederation but the convention ended up completely removing them and started a debate on the creation of the constitution that is still in effect today. Hamilton was a believer in a strong central government with a president having a life-long term of rule. The main gist of his six-hour speech in the session was that he put forward an idea for a president with king-like powers with an elitist bunch of senators, as was later quoted by his fellow politician James Madison. It can be seen that he was a fan of the British system of government which he declared in his speech as "the best in the world".Although many of his suggestions were ignored by the majority of the members, yet this speech can be observed as an everlasting impact on the psyche of the newly independent American politicians. The political thought of Hamilton was further elaborated through a series of papers called the Federalist papers.

**Federalist Paper no. 51 by James Madison (1788)**

The Federalist papers were without a doubt the most important political papers in the history of the United States as they played an important part in the refinement of the US Constitution. Mostly, we can see that all the federalist papers are a debate about the rights of the states and the central government. However, there is no doubt that the set of papers that left their mark on the American Political thought are the Federalists papers no. 51 presented by James Madison (page 222), who also happened to have a completely different view than Hamilton. These sets of papers are important because of the concept of the checks and balances system that is seen as the greatest strength of the US constitution even today. This idea was expressed in the famous quote "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition". The main idea of the concept was to stop the accumulation of power in the hands of a group of individuals or a single institution. The whole system of governance was divided into three separate branches: Legislature, Judiciary, and Administration. These ideas of checks and balances were based on the philosophies of Rosseau and Locke. This concept changed the system of governance of the whole world as we know it, as its variations are observed in the constitutions of several states today.

**The Bill of Rights (1791)**

After their presentation, there was a debate on the federalist papers and it was observed that the constitution has given very few rights to the general public. The main focus of the founders was to create an efficient system of government. Seeing this, a change was proposed by Charles Pinckney to include the rights of the general public as it was the core issue that started the entire struggle in the first place. It was strongly debated by the Anti-federalist group of the Congress that freedom of the practice of religion, press and peaceful protests should be incorporated in the constitution as these rights were the core of struggle of independence from the British Crown. Therefore, a set of ten amendments was proposed that guaranteed the rights of the common folk. These amendments were dubbed as The Bill of Rights (page 281). These debates were met with a negative response with the federalist who regarded the whole ratification of the bill as a "silly exercise", placing their arguments that the division in branches of the state was a guarantee of the preservation of the rights of all citizens of the US. Nevertheless, some flaws are still present in contemporary times the rights like the “ability to bear arms” (Amendment II) which is responsible for the current Gun Violence that the US is experiencing these days.

**Farewell Address by George Washington (1796)**

The American political thought would have not been the same if George Washington, President, and Commander-in-Chief of the United States of America had not stepped down after the completion of two terms in the office. But that is just one part of his famous thirty-two-page Farewell Address (page 333). In the second part, he declared national unity as the common religion of the Americans. This proclamation was made for the preservation of state unity as three years prior, there was a known tussle between pro-France Jefferson and the pro-British Hamilton which was resolved by the Neutrality Act of 1793. Washington gave the concept of neutrality which would be followed until the declaration of the Second World War. He said in his address that regional entanglements should be avoided at all costs. In the third part of his address, he openly criticized the practice of Partisan Politics, equating it to fire that can give warmth but will burn out everything they have accomplished if it gets out of control. He said that the political divisions will give minorities artificial powers to undermine the writ of the government which should be avoided at all costs. He also laid stress on the demarcation of the sphere of influences of the branches of the state so that they would be able to serve their true purposes. In the end paragraphs, he laid stress on keeping good credit by avoiding participation in wars and being honest and just in their international ties with the major powers of the world. Many of the points of his speech are still in effect today as they have guided the American political thought to this day.

**Jacksonian Democracy (1820s)**

After losing the War of 1812, a major overhaul of the existing system was required. In the elections of 1828, John Quincy Adams was defeated by Andrew Jackson (page 390), and thus he became the president of the United States. He was hailed as a common man, especially after his successful war campaigns in 1812. His tenure gave rise to rapid industrialization of the economy of the US as they believed that it was essential for their progress. The concept of Manifest Destiny was also put forward in his tenure which gave the idea of a state that could exist from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean that happens soon after. The Jacksonians also started the practice of Patronage, which is the appointment of their favored men in the political offices of power. Needless to say, that this practice was damaging to the government but it is still present in one form or another as even still today the President appoints his favored people as the secretaries of different departments. This era also saw the United States steady march towards the Laissez-Faire Economic Model.

**The Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln (1863)**

On November 19th, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln gave the shortest speech given by any US President in office (page 685). In his speech composed of only ten sentences, he managed to deliver a message that span volumes. In his rather poetic speech, signified by the term “four scores and seven years ago”, he would underline the threat that the underway civil war posed to the survival of the Union. The also presented this peril on the Union as an opportunity to establish the principle of equality on permanent grounds, as these were the times when slavery was still present in the Southern States that had left the Union. Needless to say, these ten sentences changed the course of history forever but its effects would be realized years later when the United States elected its first Black President, Barack H. Obama. This speech found itself as a reference in many official documents like the French Constitution of 1958 and China’s Sun Yet San’s Three Principles of the People. This speech was also the way forward of the American Political thought as it settled the long-standing debate on slavery that was the cause of many inefficient decisions in Congress.

**The Gospel of Wealth by Andrew Carnegie (1889)**

Carnegie was a Scottish Immigrant that ended up as the second richest person in the United States (Page 732). He gave his belief, later dubbed the Gospel of Wealth, that the rich had the responsibility towards their countrymen. He believed that capitalism is the answer to all the world's problems if it was implemented responsibly. In his three options for wealth, he showed his resentment for leaving one's hard-earned riches to heir that did not realize its value. So, he laid down three options. First, he advocated for the establishment of trusts for benefiting the poor. Second, he gave the concept of charities that would help the poor during one's lifetime. Lastly, he gave the concept of Inheritance tax so that a hefty amount could be collected for public welfare projects. He practiced what he preached, giving away at least ninety percent of his wealth to charity before he died. This speech strengthened the American "land of Opportunity" narrative.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the above-stated events have influenced the shape of American Political thought as we see today. This evolution of political thought was based on unprecedented events that were unique in the history of the world. It also showed that agreements and disagreements are common in politics. Also, it set several standards that are followed by the many democratic nations in the world based on the system of government mentioned in the Federalist Papers. These principles of political thought set the Americans from a group of people struggling under the thumb of the British king to the status of hegemon of the unipolar world.

# Works Cited

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