

## ENLIGHTENED THOUGHTS BECOME ACTIONS



*Independence Hall, Philadelphia*

**STOP:** Complete Section A Questions.

### Enlightened Despots

While the writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment were busy with their pens, most kings and queens of continental Europe were ruling as absolute monarchs. **Absolutism** gave these rulers total control over their governments and their people. In some cases, this included a vast amount of **serfs** or peasants who were obligated to do work on the properties of the landowners. Unlike slaves, they could not be sold but were obligated to remain with the land. As the ideas of the Enlightenment spread, many individuals began to question the authority of their leaders and the conditions of the citizenry. They concluded that the skill of critical thinking could be used to turn governing into a science; this would result in the creation of better laws and useful reforms. The philosophes had a practical side, and they knew it was unlikely that monarchs would give up their power willingly. Therefore, it seemed that enlightened despots or monarchs with a clear

understanding of the philosophy of the Enlightenment were the best hope of improving society.



*Imperial Crown of the United Kingdom*

How did Europe's rulers react to the ideas of the Enlightenment? Some, like **King Louis XV of France**, chose to ignore the whole movement and censor the new writers. It was not an effective practice, but it made them feel more secure. Other rulers, however, were caught up in the spirit of the new thought and were impressed with the inspiring concepts centered on reason and progress. These enlightened despots often favored religious tolerance, legal reform and useful projects. However, make no mistake, power politics always took precedence over enlightened teaching. Let's examine two of the most prominent rulers who fit this description—King Frederick II of Prussia and Empress Catherine II of Russia.

**STOP:** Complete Section B questions.



*Palace built by Frederick the Great*

## **King Frederick II of Prussia**

Most of us would have enjoyed spending an afternoon with **Frederick II (also known as Frederick the Great)**. He was witty, brilliant and interested in almost everything. Frederick lived modestly, at least by the standards set for the European monarchs of his day, and he worked hard at the business of ruling. His attitude conveyed his desire to serve and to strengthen the state, and his views were generally humane and liberal. Schools under his leadership improved, and scholars were permitted to publish their findings. Religious tolerance of both Catholics and Protestants became the norm.

However, Frederick the Great never lost sight of the fact that the Prussian nobility was the backbone of the army and the foundation of his power. This placed major limitations on his quest for reform. For example, Frederick II openly admitted that serfdom was wrong, but he did not want to offend wealthy landowners by doing anything about it. The concept of religious freedom did not extend to Polish and Prussian Jews who were confined to small, overcrowded ghettos. Because he did not want to risk losing the support of his military officers, Frederick reduced the use of torture but did not abolish it. Although he preferred to justify his reign with practical results and said little about divine right, Frederick had no intention of jeopardizing his rule for the sake of the ideals of the Enlightenment.



*Catherine the Great*

## **Empress Catherine II of Russia**

One of the most fascinating figures of the eighteenth century was **Catherine II**, Empress of Russia. Her thirty-four year reign was filled with political challenges, intellectual advancements and intrigue. Influenced by the writers of the Enlightenment, many of whom visited her court, Catherine called a constitutional convention in 1767. She invited nobles, townspeople and peasants in the hope of creating domestic reform and new laws. However, when the participants argued and accomplished very little, Catherine simply sent them home and abandoned the whole idea of a constitution.

Although she claimed to be an enlightened ruler, improving the lives of all the Russian peasants conflicted with Catherine's need to have the support of the nobility. This became very obvious in 1773 when Catherine sent her armies to crush a massive uprising supported by peasants, soldiers and escaped prisoners. Catherine the Great was also committed to the territorial expansion of her empire and, like her counterpart Frederick II of Prussia, ignored the philosophe's

arguments against war. In short, Catherine's commitment to the teachings of the Enlightenment was more of an intellectual pursuit than a political reality.

**STOP:** Complete Section C questions.

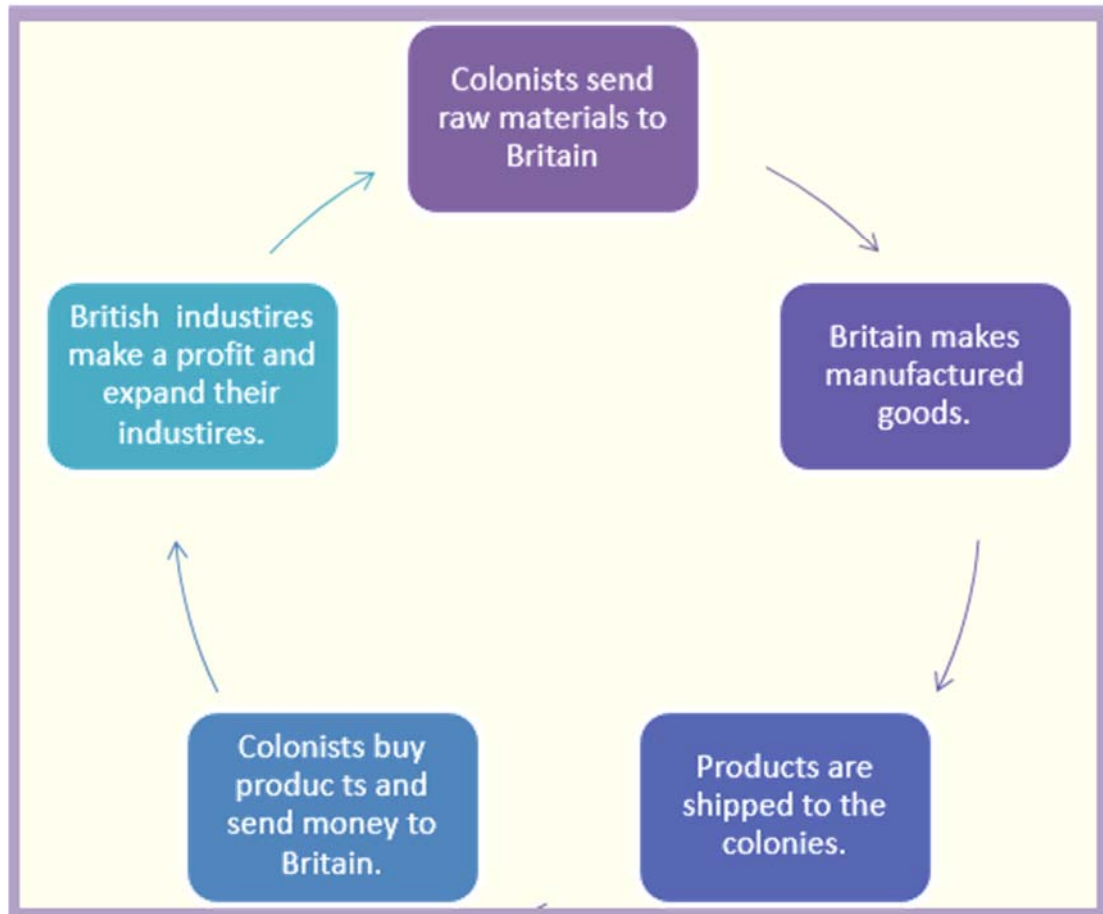
## The Enlightenment Crosses the Atlantic

In theory, Britain's government, referred to as a **limited monarchy**, was considered the best on the planet, at least according to the standards of the Enlightenment. However, theory and reality were two different things. The king's power was limited by a law-making body called Parliament. It was divided into two parts—the House of Lords and the House of Commons. By its very name, it seemed the **House of Commons** should be a perfect example of democracy in action. Yes, its members were elected by popular vote, but only men who owned the required amount of land were eligible to cast a ballot. As a result, the House of Commons was elected by five percent of the population. This small group of citizens favored government policies that encouraged national economic expansion and individual profits.

In the eighteenth century, a country's international status was directly related to its gold supply. To accumulate gold, a nation had to sell more products than it bought. The British concluded that the key to prosperity was the establishment of colonies so they directed their attention to winning and controlling them. Britain directed colonial affairs based on the principle of **mercantilism**. This economic philosophy stressed the concept that colonies existed primarily to enrich the mother country. In contrast, the American colonists saw themselves as loyal British citizens who deserved the same rights and privileges as their counterparts in Britain. To understand how these differing views led to revolution, one needs to simply follow the money.

**STOP:** Complete Section D questions.

## A Quick View of Mercantilism



The American colonies served as a ready market for British manufactured products and a cheap source for materials shipped to Britain by the colonists. To assure the system worked to their benefit, the British passed the **Navigation Acts** in 1660 and 1663. According to these laws, the Americans could not sell their most valuable products to any country other than Britain and could only buy products from other countries if they paid high taxes on them. In an attempt to circumvent the law, the colonists resorted to smuggling, and it was difficult for the British to control.

Political events in Europe pulled Great Britain into the **Seven Years' War** and drew battle lines between the British and French settlers in North America. After the British brought the war to a successful conclusion, they reasoned that the colonies should be responsible for a portion of the war debt since they benefitted from the expensive military campaigns. Britain reasoned that a new tax required

of the colonists was a logical consequence. The **Stamp Act**, which required the colonists to pay for the stamping of legal documents such as deed and wills, was so vehemently opposed it had to be repealed. As the British continued their attempts to tax the American portion of the Empire, the colonists began to see themselves in terms of the ideals of the Enlightenment. They used the concepts of John Locke and other philosophers to justify their objections to the activities of the British crown.

Eventually, the situation became intolerable, and the Americans wrote the Declaration of Independence based on violations of the social contract. Once they won their independence, Americans again used the Enlightenment principles to set up a new government. The thoughts of Rousseau, Locke and Montesquieu resulted in a system that drew its authority from the consent of the governed. The Constitution stressed a form of leadership based on the separation and the balance of powers. It was indeed the Enlightenment philosophies that drove the American Revolution and the establishment of a new government. These developments strongly reflected the Enlightenment beliefs of reason and progress.

**STOP:** Complete Section E questions.



*Jose de San Martin*

## The Enlightenment Moves South

The Enlightenment ideas also impacted events in the southern parts of the Western Hemisphere. The countries that colonized these lands (**Portugal, Spain and France**) all spoke languages derived from Latin so the regions of the Caribbean, South American, Central America and Mexico were referred to collectively as **Latin America**. The population ranged from the enormously wealthy to the extremely poor. People who were born in the mother countries and held the most important offices were known as **peninsulares**. Their control of the valuable import and export trade was responsible for much of their financial success. Ranked next were the **creoles** who were born in Latin America to parents of European origin. Most were rich landowners and held less important government offices. These two groups made up a mere twenty percent of the populace. The vast majority of the inhabitants consisted of **mestizos** (individuals of a European and Indian background), **mulattos** (individuals of European and African background) and native Indians. The millions of Indians were considered the lowest in respect to social status. They were technically free but were treated no better than slaves. Their plight came to the attention of **King Charles III** of Spain who fit the mold of an enlightened despot. He made an effort to introduce reforms to benefit the Indians. However, the distance between Spain and New Spain, as Spanish lands in South America were called, was great; laws were difficult to enforce if the peninsulares did not agree with them. The fear of an Indian revolt encouraged the neglect of these laws.

In the meantime, the ideas of the Enlightenment began to drift into Latin America. North American ships visited South American ports staffed with sailors who sometimes brought copies of the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as well as the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau. The Creole elite became familiar with these works and came to believe that certain rights should be extended to them. Creoles began to think of themselves as Americans rather than Spaniards.





This new trend in thought led to a series of revolutions in Latin America from 1810 to 1830 and brought to the forefront two brilliant generals inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, their Creole backgrounds and events in Europe as well as North America. **Simon Bolivar**, known as El Libertador, was a well-educated and well-traveled Venezuelan Creole. Having read the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau along with those of Jefferson and Paine, he led revolutionaries in Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia. **Jose de San Martín** guided the military activities of the patriots in Chile and Argentina. Their combined forces eventually drove out the Spanish forces and inspired other regions of Latin America to seek independence as well.

Although Latin America included sixteen independent nations by 1830, political freedom and government by the consent of the governed proved to be elusive goals. Some military leaders had come to enjoy the power they had achieved during the struggles for independence. This led to a rise in dictatorships in most Latin American countries. These rulers were mainly concerned with increasing their own wealth and status; they did little to improve the lives of average citizens and the members of the lower classes.

**Stop:** Complete Section F Questions.

## What Does It All Mean?

The Enlightenment inspired leaders and citizens to view government from a new vantage point. Some absolute monarchs saw it as a tool to assist in reforming their government and strengthening their states. The revolutions across the Atlantic Ocean changed the idea of forming a social contract from a possibility to a reality. Rational human beings could exercise individual freedom and maintain a representative government. You will soon see that events in North America strongly affected France as French officers returned to their native country inspired by their tour of duty in North America.

## Additional Activities and Resources for this Unit



[Unit 3 Main Points Worksheet](#)

[Unit 3 Why Latin America Wanted Independence from Spain \(article with quiz\)](#)

[Unit 3 Why Latin America Wanted Independence Organizer](#)