

Comparing the American, French and Haitian Revolutions

By Victoria Stempel

The American, French, and Haitian Revolutions all achieved their initial political goals with varying degrees of success, although victory sometimes meant great loss to the nations. Since the Americans faced as less opposition and social inequality than their French and Haitian counterparts, the patriots went on to defeat Great Britain and establish independence without overturning the colonial social order. Despite terrible human, monetary, and social costs, the French and Haitian revolutions were able to propel the idea of democracy and the ideal of equality far beyond the boundaries established by the American Revolution.

Rebellions in the various parts of the world had differing political goals, but all seemed to be inspired by the Enlightenment's radical philosophies. The American Declaration of Independence emphasized the principle of popular sovereignty, which states that all governmental power comes from the general will of the people, a concept formulated by Rousseau. It claimed that "all men are created equal," reflecting the ideas of Locke. Also modeled after the writings of Locke, the American Constitution insisted that governments exist to protect the natural rights of the citizen. The French revolutionaries called for reforms such as fairer taxes and freedom of the press. They wanted the privileged classes to give up their exclusive hunting rights, special legal status, and exemption from taxes. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen announced that men were "born and remain free and equal in rights," and enjoyed natural rights to "liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression." The text proclaimed that all male citizens were equal before the law, asserted freedom of religion, and called for taxes to be levied according to ability to pay. Inspired by talk of liberty and equality and embittered by suffering, Haiti's slaves revolted in 1791. The bitter and confrontational struggle was fought to achieve an end to slavery, racial equality and national independence.

Revolutionary upheaval during the last decades of the eighteenth century was very different, but focused on the principles brought to light during the Enlightenment, especially of equality before the law.

The revolutions of America, France, and Haiti achieved many of their political goals. Having defeated Britain, the citizens of the new American republic created the most democratic government of the time, and in 1787 a Constitutional Convention wrote a new constitution that established a system of representative government with elected legislature to reflect the wishes of the governed. In France, Napoleon set up a system of public schools under government control and recognized peasants' right to lands they had bought from the Church and nobles during the revolution. Among Napoleon's most lasting reforms was a new law code, the Napoleonic Code. It embodied Enlightenment principles such as equality of all citizens before the law, religious toleration, and advancement based on merit. Elections were held with expanded, though limited, suffrage. Napoleon's 1802 attempt to reestablish French authority led to the capture of the rebel leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, but failed to retake the colony, which became the independent republic of Haiti in 1804.

However, numerous aspects of the end of the revolutions did not meet the nations' original political goals. The Constitution of the United States gave the vote only to a minority of the adult male population and protected slavery. Yet most Americans at the time did not have the right to vote. The privilege was extended only to white men who were able to meet certain property requirements; women could not cast a ballot, nor could African Americans, enslaved or free. It would take more than a century of struggle before the right to vote and equal protection under the law were extended to all adult Americans. At the same time, Napoleon backed off from some of the revolution's social reforms. He made peace with the Catholic Church in the Concordat of 1801, which kept the Church under state control but recognized religious freedom for Catholics. He encouraged émigrés to return. Even the Napoleonic Code undid some of the reforms of the French Revolution. Women lost most of their newly gained rights and could not exercise the rights of citizenship. Napoleon valued order and authority over individual rights, which was a major goal of the French Revolution. Tens of thousands of people died in the Haitian

Revolution, the economy was destroyed, and public administration was corrupted by more than a decade of violence; however, the revolutionaries attained racial equality and the end of slavery. Rival Haitian leaders fought for power until finally Haiti became a republic.

America, France, and Haiti had various degrees of success when it came to reaching their initial political goals at the conclusion of their individual revolutions. The United States of America achieved a system of representative government, but the vote was given only to a minority of the adult male population, and slavery continued. The French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte upheld various of the reforms of the French Revolution, but not the most radical; additionally, he acted at his leisure as France was essentially held under popular authoritarianism. In the end, Haiti was the sole nation that achieved all of its political goals; at the end of its revolution, Haiti was an independent republic with racial equality and no slavery. Nevertheless, the social, economical, and political order was destroyed for countless years. Haiti accomplished all of its political goals, but at a great loss to the country.