

Period 3: 1754-1800

Frequently Tested US History Concepts

1. Bill of Rights

After the US Constitution had been written and ratified, there were many who still feared the strict wording of the document. The document was generous in the power it gave to the federal government but some felt that it granted the federal level too much power. Penned by James Madison, the document attempted to assuage the fears of those who were unhappy with a strong, monarch-like centralized government.

The **Bill of Rights** refers directly to the first ten amendments to the Constitution, guaranteeing things like freedom of speech and religion, but the Bill of Rights ultimately came to represent the fluid nature of the Constitution. Its impact lies in how it was interpreted during many historic Supreme Court cases. In this way, the Bill of Rights will appear most frequently within landmark court cases. A strong understanding of the BoR will help you unpack seminal court cases.

2. Boston Massacre

The truth surrounding the **Boston Massacre** has been clouded by competing narratives, but we do know Americans of the time considered it to be a first step between colonist settlers and British soldiers, but the propaganda that rose around it whipped the colonies into a frenzy.

In 1770, Great Britain sent troops to Boston as a means to protect officials trying to administer legislation recently upheld by Parliament. A crowd led by Crispus Attucks, a slave, began to harass British soldiers who fired upon the crowd. Several Americans were killed and the episode was heralded as a turning point where colonial sentiment turned from support of the British crown toward independence. The Boston Massacre commonly pops up on the test in questions involving the road to the Revolution, propaganda, and resistance.

3. Boston Tea Party

The **Boston Tea Party** was the final straw in a series of events that led to the American Revolution. The event started as a protest of Parliament's Tea Act of 1773, which gave the East India Company a monopoly in selling tea in the colonies. The Sons of Liberty, a liberation-focused rebellion group, saw this as an intentional act to weaken the local, colonial economy and merchant class, and they would not stand for it.

Men of Boston disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians and boarded the East India Company ships that were held in the harbor and began to toss the tea shipment

overboard. The Boston Tea Party is often seen on the test in questions surrounding the causes of the Revolutionary War, the philosophy of liberty, and nonviolent resistance.

4. Checks and Balances

One of the most important concepts in the foundation of the American government is checks and balances. Checks and balances is a political framework that separates power into a three-way system, preventing one portion of government from gaining dominance over the other two. The United States government is divided into the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branches. Each of these branches is granted a very specific scope of power that the other branches do not.

Also, each branch of government is given powers that allow it to keep its counterparts in check. The significance of this model cannot be understated because it was and continues to prevent a seizure of absolute power by a single man or body politic. Understanding checks and balances, then, is essential to fully understanding America's handling of power, legislation, and executive actions at large.

5. The Constitution

The **US Constitution** is one of the most important documents in the United States (and really, global) history. It established the three-branch system that the United States government has come to depend on, and it instituted a Congress comprised of the House of Representatives and the Senate. It also granted military power to the President of the United States, and it offered the right of the Supreme Court to interpret laws as it applies for every citizen of the United States. Understanding the Constitution is vital to understanding how the US government was not only constructed but also how it operates today.

6. Declaration of Independence

Written by Thomas Jefferson and approved by the Continental Congress in 1776, this seminal document embraced the official formation of a new nation. With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Congress deemed it important to outline their reasoning for breaking the British throne and forming their own nation.

The body of the document claimed that all men were created equal and guaranteed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It also outlined the crimes committed by the British throne and denounced Parliament for its treatment of the colonies. By its ratification, the American colonies bound themselves on the path of self-governance and sovereignty. This document appears most frequently on DBQs, questions involving revolution, liberty, and rhetoric.

7. Sons of Liberty

The **Sons of Liberty** were a group of colonists who lived in Colonial America that were unhappy with the practices of the British Crown. They formed in order to defend the colonists from further injustices at the hands of Great Britain and to combat any further taxation they deemed unfair.

Among the ranks of the Sons of Liberty were notable men like Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Paul Revere. Another famous member was Patrick Henry who spoke the words, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" The Sons of Liberty represent one of the most pivotal groups in carrying out the Revolution.