1776 Vs 1789 Essay, Research Paper

The American and French Revolutions both occurred in the eighteenth century;subverting the existing government and opening the way for capitalism andconstitutionalism. Because of these similarities, the two revolutions are often assumed to beessentially eastern and western versions of each other. However, the two are fundamentallydifferent in their reason, their rise, progress, termination, and in the events that followed,even to the present. The American Revolution was not primarily fought for independence. Independencewas an almost accidental by-product of the Americans? attempt to rebel against and removeunfair taxes levied on them by British Parliament. Through propaganda; sermons, speeches,newspaper articles, and pamphlets; public opinion was manipulated to convince the colonistsand the world that they had legal and moral right to be separate from Great Britain. The American colonies, because of the nature of colonies, had a strained, equivocalrelationship with Britain to begin with. Britain saw the colonies as a means to an end; tostrengthen their own power, enrich their own nation, and provide additional tax revenue.The colonists therefore did not feel as traitors in rebelling against England. They were adistant colony separating from the mother country. The American colonists were primarily seeking freedom of trade and, because theyfelt it unfair to pay taxes to Britain, were attempting to do away with these taxes throughwhatever means they thought necessary, including revolt. The Americans were fighting not to create their freedom, but to maintain it. At thetime the Revolution occurred, the American society was freer and less controlled bymonarchy and aristocracy than any nation on earth. They were fighting a fear ofsuppression, rather than actual suppression. They were resisting the force of tyranny beforeit could be applied. The revolt occurred not because of suffering, but out of principle. The French Revolution was fought primarily for the reason of overthrowing theexisting government, and establishing a new one to replace it. It was an altruistic revolutionthat was fought to liberate individuals from crushing imperialism and provide basic humanfreedom. It was a revolt against absolute feudal and monarchial restraint. The spirit of thisrevolution was much more radical. The entire country was in upheaval, and the intent wasto entirely destroy the ruling class. It was fought out of actual oppression and not just thefear that it might occur. At the time of the French Revolution, society was still based on a system offeudalism dating back centuries. The citizens of France did not experience equality. Thenobility were extremely wealthy and becoming wealthier. The peasants were reduced toextreme poverty in an attempt by the monarch and noblemen to build up greater wealth forthemselves. There was no middle class or working class in France. The suppressed farmerswere overwhelmed with higher and higher taxes and were ready for a revolution withouthaving to be propagandized into it.1 The French Revolution occurred out of a basic need tooverthrow tyranny. The American Revolutionists found it relatively easier to fight against the Englishgovernment because they did not feel an extreme loyalty to their ?mother country?. First,they were on an entirely different continent and separated by the Atlantic Ocean from theirempire. Second, the American colonists were comprised of immigrants not only from GreatBritain, but from all European nations as well. The colonists of other nationalities, quiteobviously, felt no loyalty whatsoever to King George the Third, Parliament, or Britain.Therefore the colonists did not have to overcome traitorous feelings in their fight forindependence. The French Revolution, conversely, was a matter of the immediate subjects rebellingagainst their government. The oppressed and the oppressors were of one nation, livingtogether on one soil. The French Revolution had to deal with feelings of being traitoroustoward their country while rebelling against it. The American and French Revolutions differed in the governing of the ?new?country during and after their revolutions. The Americans were much better equipped tohandle the problem faced in governing a newly forming republic. The colonies hadpractically been self-governing before the war, with their own political officials. It wasrelatively easy, therefore, for them to organize thirteen colonies into one unified nation toachieve national goals. The Continental Congress had been in existence since 1774 and waslater to become a forerunner of the new federal government. Each colony also had their owncolonial government, which were adopted into the new state governments. Thispre-existence of government prevented the newly forming republic from being left open to arevolutionary dictatorship in America.2 The French Revolution did leave the country vulnerable to dictator control. Therevolution overthrew the entire existing government and left the country disorganized, withno real leadership; in a state of chaos. France did not have even the pseudo-self-governmentof the American colonies to fall back on. They had to start from nothing and build agovernment strong enough to govern a volatile, changing nation. They did not succeed. Thenew government set up in Paris was weak and was overthrown within four months bycounter revolution and the Revolutionary Commune was formed.3 The American and French Revolutions both resulted in Declarations ofIndependence and Bills of Rights. The American version primarily dealt with the creation ofnew government power once the authority of England was abolished. It was a constitutionof political freedom. It was based on the Protestant belief that men need government in orderto control their badness. The French Bill of Rights proclaimed that every man, by birth, was entitled to certainrights independent of the government; it then reiterates these rights to all French citizens.The French constitution encompasses the theory that men are good outside society, which isbasically a Catholic belief. Their constitution dealt with human rights. This wasn?t strongenough to govern by; for by definition the government wrote itself to be unconstitutional andleft itself no authority. They were trying to found their new government on principles and tohave the government as an agent and not as a master. Both the French and American revolutions opened the way for capitalism in thesecountries. Prior to the American Revolution, England had handled all colonial trade; theirtrading patterns were subject to British controls. Most American merchants grewaccustomed to this system and depended on it. During and following the revolution, theAmerican merchants had to pursue new trading opportunities to replace the ones they hadlost. Asiatic trade was opened up, new demands were created, and business grew andprospered. The war itself encouraged growth of production in America, and brought inforeign investors.4 The American Revolution provided freedom of trade and shaped thefuture for a capitalistic America. In France, capitalism?s growth was apparent in the development of middle,mercantile, class. Factories were built and industry expanded; and as a result cities becamemuch larger and more numerous. Manufacturing provided jobs and caused rural farmworkers to move to the cities. Because there were few pre-revolution factories, all commerceand trade as a result of the expanding capitalism was also new. The French merchants hadto not only develop new products, but also methods of distribution. They were not nearly asambitious in this regard as the post-revolutionary Americans; an attitude that is still apparentin commerce today. The American and French revolutions both quite obviously created a need for a newform of governing and law making and enforcement. The first step the French took was for each village to arm itself. This was forconfederation against unlawful tax collection as well as to provide safety for the villages.The second thing they did was to hold an election by which they elected twelve hundredthousand municipal magistrates and one hundred thousand judges.5 This new municipalpower inherited all the ruins of authority. It was what held France together in the stages offorming a new government, through the counter-revolution, and the stabilization of the newgovernment. The revolution and the chaos following it caused many differences of opinion as tohow France?s future as a nation should progress. Three political parties were formed. Thelargest party, the Marsh party, were moderates and didn?t want any extreme actions to betaken. The Girondins party was composed of the overthrown feudalists and wealthy landowners. The Jacobins, or Montagnards, represented Paris and its members were professionalmen put into power by lower class support. They were a form of low level communists. Theparty that finally prevailed was the Marsh party and this is still apparent in France?smoderate attitude toward government today.6 The American people did not have the same problems to face following theirrevolutionary war. Their enemy had been on foreign soil and was therefore eradicated bythe wars end; there were not two opposing sides living together. Therefore there was noanimosity to overcome and the Americans were not nearly so concerned with their personalsafety and unlawful tax collection as the French citizens. The Americans also hadthroughout the war been governed by the continental congress and therefore did not need tohold elections to select a governing body. They just incorporated the existing system into thenew federal government. The Americans did have political parties, but these had been in existence prior to therevolution. The two predominant parties were the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. TheFederalists stood for extreme nationalism and a strong central government. TheAnti-Federalists were opposed to the establishment of a strong national government.7However, the Americans, in contrast to the French, did not elect just one political party topower. They elected government officials from both parties, and this practice is stillfollowed today, allowing for a more equal representation of the people by the government. The American and French revolutions were both unavoidable and necessary at thetimes when they occurred. The American Revolution was unavoidable and necessarybecause of greed and fear; and the French revolution was unavoidable and necessary becauseof unfairness and suppression and a need to make life better. The reasons each revolutionwas fought are still obvious in the each nation is today.