**Enrichment Essay - Roots of American Democracy**

Stop for a moment and notice the thoughts you have as you read the title of this essay. What ideas come to mind when you read the word *roots*? How about *American*? *Democracy*?

Whatever your thoughts are, they are uniquely your own. But most likely they grew out of something you’ve heard or read, or maybe seen on TV or in the movies. This is how most ideas grow. They start from something outside ourselves. Then we make them our own and sometimes improve on them.

The Americans who led the Revolution and created the Constitution were no different from you. Starting with other people’s ideas, they created the government we live under today. The ideas they drew upon are the roots of American democratic thinking and institutions. Let’s look at some of these roots.

**Religious Tradition**

One important influence on early Americans was the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Nearly all the leaders of the Revolution believed in God. Most were Christians whose ideas about human dignity and freedom owed much to the teachings of the Bible. (The Bible includes sacred writings of both Judaism and Christianity.) Many Americans saw human liberty not just in political terms, but as a right bestowed by God.

Leaders like Thomas Jefferson were also influenced by the European Enlightenment. The Enlightenment prized reason and observation as sources of truth. Many Enlightenment thinkers sought a “natural religion” that was based on observing the order and lawfulness of the universe. They thought of God as the architect of this orderly universe. In discovering universal laws such as gravity, they believed, scientists were revealing God’s laws for the natural world. In a similar way, people could find the “natural law” that should govern society. For thinkers like England’s John Locke, this natural law included basic rights that no human law or ruler should violate.

That is why the Declaration of Independence speaks of “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.” These words express Jefferson’s belief that liberty and equality came from natural law—the law established by the God who created the world.

**The English Parliamentary Tradition**

In their thinking about government, early Americans drew on the English parliamentary tradition. They knew it well because they had been English subjects.

As far back as Magna Carta (1215), the English had put limits on the king’s ability to rule as he pleased. For important matters like taxation, the king needed approval from the leading citizens of his realm.

Over time, the English established Parliament as the body that represented the king’s subjects. Parliament was divided into two houses. The House of Lords was made up of aristocrats who held their position for life. The House of Commons was made up of representatives elected by the people.

The framers of the Constitution adapted this tradition and made it more democratic. In place of a king who ruled for life, they put a president who had to run for reelection every four years. In place of Parliament, they created a Congress with two houses. The Senate was designed to be a small, thoughtful body, much like the House of Lords. Unlike English lords, however, senators had to run for reelection every six years. Even the House of Representatives was more democratic. In England, the House of Commons could go seven years without elections. In the United States, every member of the House of Representatives faced election every two years.

**Classical Liberal Principles**

Another aspect of the Enlightenment was a school of thought called *classical liberalism*. The most basic principle of classical liberalism was that human beings could be trusted to decide what was best for themselves. The more freedom people enjoyed, the better off society would be. Government should therefore serve the people’s needs instead of the other way around.

These ideas had been argued forcefully by John Locke. His *Second Treatise on Government* was published in 1690, just as English parliamentary tradition was taking its modern form. Locke’s book spoke of each man’s right to “life, liberty, and estate [property].” Do these words sound familiar? Thomas Jefferson changed them to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for the Declaration of Independence.

For Locke, property ownership was central to classical liberalism. (And no wonder. He was a wealthy man, with investments in the silk and slave trades.) This aspect of classical liberalism got a big boost from another English thinker, Adam Smith. His book *The Wealth of Nations* came out the same year as the Declaration of Independence. Smith argued that the best way for a nation to become wealthy was to let people conduct their business as they pleased, free from government interference. This was another argument for the liberty urged by classical liberalism.

**Civic Republicanism**

Classical liberalism’s optimistic belief in liberty had a weakness. Sometimes people exercise their rights in ways that harm others. What if your next-door neighbor plays loud music at three o’clock in the morning, waking up everyone in your home? Should your neighbor be free to do as he pleases? To keep people from using their freedom in selfish ways, early American leaders relied on the idea of civic republicanism.

Civic republicanism went all the way back to the ancient Greeks, nearly 2,500 years ago. It called for citizens to do what was best for the republic (the whole society), not just for themselves. Civic republicans would actively participate in government. They would put unselfishness before greed, resist political corruption, and play referee when two or more elements of society competed for power. (Notice that this meaning of *republican* applies to everyone, not just members of today’s Republican Party.)

Many of the nation’s early leaders believed that civic republicanism depended on citizens receiving a good education. “Establish the law for educating the common people,” urged Thomas Jefferson. Today these words are inscribed in the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. Part of the reason you are asked to study American history is the hope that you, too, will be a civic republican.

1. Create an illustration with these features:   
  
• at the top of the screen, a large and strong tree, with the word America on its trunk   
• three roots beneath the tree with these three labels: English Parliamentary Traditions, Civic Republicanism, and Classical Liberal Principles

2. Then, write an explanation for each root that tells how each of these ideas has influenced life in the United States.