

VII. The Tradition of English Liberty

A. The Magna Carta and the Birth of Constitutional Monarchy (1215)

1. Like other European areas after the fall of Rome, England had a monarchy.
2. In 1215, however, English lords took a positive step towards greater freedom.
 - a) King John of England was fighting the king of France. (This was an early chapter of the great argument that eventually led to the Hundred Years' War.)
 - b) Having lost Normandy, John wanted to tax his lords more than ever, but he had pushed them too far. They rebelled, and captured him.
 - c) They then forced John to sign a charter that said that he would consult with the lords in a "common council" before imposing any taxes.
3. This created a new arrangement where the power of the king was limited by a set of laws (the charter). Put simply the idea was: *the king is not above the law*.
4. Unlike in Ancient Athens and Rome, England kept its monarchy, but the power of the king was now limited by a set of laws. This is called "constitutional monarchy."
5. Because the charter of 1215 represents the birth of constitutional monarchy, it is known as the "Great Charter," or, especially, by its Latin name, *the Magna Carta*.

B. The First Parliament

1. Constitutional monarchy was always a delicate balance. The kings always wanted more power, and the people had to continually resist their ambition.
2. John and his successor Henry III both rebelled against the Magna Carta, so in 1265 one of the lord, named Simon of Montfort called upon the people to elect an assembly of representatives to support the cause against tyranny. This was called a "parliament."
3. Having an assembly that contributed to the making of laws and that sometimes opposed the king's plans proved to be relatively good way of preventing tyranny.

C. Liberty Transplanted

1. The early colonies in America, with an ocean between them and the power of the kings, were largely able to manage their own affairs. The first parliament was held in the Americas in 1619. It was called the Virginia House of Burgesses.
2. Again, however, there was a delicate balance between the expectation of freedom by Englishmen in America and the desire for power by the kings of England.
3. By the end of the Colonial Wars, king George III had reached a new aspiration. His empire was *global*, and he expected to have power over the colonies.
4. In the coming *American Revolution*, the Founding Fathers would build on the tradition of English liberty — the tradition of limiting the power of the kings through laws and parliaments. In the end, however, they decided that American would not have a king at all. It would be a *republic*.