The American Revolution

Discuss the nature of the American Revolution and the conditions that fostered it.

I. Concept number one: Discuss the nature of the American Revolution.
   A. There seems to be a growing agreement among historians that the American Revolution was not so much brought about by a single “cause” as by a set of “conditions.”

   B. While admitting that the new taxes were ill-timed, many historians deny that British Imperial policy discriminated heavily against the colonists.

   C. Although England’s taxation measures precipitated the rebellion, it would be a mistake to interpret the American Revolution as resulting solely from economic causes.

   D. John Adams: “But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the People...”

   1. Thus the American Revolution was a process, that started with Virginia House of Burgesses of 1619 and the Mayflower Compact of 1620 and continued through the First and Second Continental Congress.
2. The American Revolutionary War was fought to preserve what the American Revolution as a process had completed by 1776.

3. Adams stated the significance about the American Revolution was not that the colonists invented new principles; but, “they realized the theories of the wisest writers”—they legalized them, by institutionalizing them.

E. Dr. Benjamin Rush: There is nothing more common than to confound the terms of American Revolution with those of the late American War. The American war is over, but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed.”

II. Concept number two: Discuss the five conditions that fostered the American Revolution.

A. The first condition is what has been called the “silent” pressure of the “environment” re-enforced the idea of the worth of the individual and his self-reliance—as discussed in the essay under Georgia.

1. The environment gave physical proof that all men should share certain basic political rights of “Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness.”
2. During the late 17th and early 18th centuries an important internal transition was taking place within each of the colonies. This metamorphosis was a change from colonies to provinces.

3. Social Instability----Social Mobility----Conflict  
   Bacon’s Rebellion

4. Social Stability----No Social Mobility

5. By 1763, in all the colonies, the pattern of provincial society had been set as the social structure transplanted from England was replaced by an indigenous provincial one that was relatively self-governing in nature.

B. The second condition that helped foster the American Revolution was the Enlightenment and its impact upon the American mind.
   1. The Enlightenment or Age of Reason was based on impersonal and scientific laws that governed the behavior of all matter.

   2. The Enlightenment gave the colonial leaders the theories to understand this Revolutionary process they had been going through and the confidence to proceed and know that they were right.
3. Europeans created the ideas of the Enlightenment while the American colonists had absorbed them during their colonial history, reflected on them and institutionalized them: all within a very natural and unrestricted process called “salutary neglect.”

C. The third condition which contributed to the American Revolution was experience in self-government from 1619-1776.

1. The concept of the limited power of the monarch was widely accepted in England starting with the Magna Carta in 1215.
   a. By the beginning of the 17th century, this idea of basic rights and limited government was a product of the English mind and experience which was transmitted to the English colonies in the form of self-government.

   b. The Magna Carta became a blue print for social and legal justice and established such ideas that no man could be judged without a trial by his peers and that his life or his property could not be taken without such a trial.

   c. It also established that no man, not even the King, was above the law. These rights and beliefs were transported to the colonies by way of colonial charters which were contracts that protected the rights and liberties of the colonists established under the Magna Carta.
2. Self-government was not an American creation: (1) it was an outgrowth of “salutary neglect” as discussed earlier and (2) an invaluable legacy from England herself.

3. As discussed under Virginia, the first representative government was established in 1619, with the House of Burgesses.

4. It was the combination of England’s neglect and these basic rights, which were developed on English soil and transplanted to American where they were allowed to germinate in a much freer environment, that led to the provincial governments which developed under the leadership of popular leaders like Sam Adams and Patrick Henry in the 1770's.

D. The fourth condition of economic independence was discussed when we covered mercantilism.

1. As was the case with political independence, economic independence was also an evolutionary process. This was demonstrated when England was forced to shift her emphasis from the regulation of trade, the primary concern in the 17th century, to the regulation of manufacturing by use of the trade acts in the 18th century.

2. Before a country can be politically independent, it has to be economically independent. By 1763, the colonists were basically economically independent but
were tied to the British Empire by economic benefits, customs, and habit.

F. The last condition wand the spark that ignited the American war for independence and led to the climax of the Revolution was the new British Imperial policy which was implemented after 1763 and represented by the "spider web analogy".

The "spider web analogy" was the beginning of the development of national unity and the creation of a common identity in America.

The years preceding the American war for independence concluded a giant cycle in which Old World ideas became New World institutions as European ideas were absorbed in the American experience and transformed into new institutions to meet American needs. Thus ideas and practices transplanted from the Old World to the New were modified by the colonists by their experience in the America environment and emerged as American principles.