

European Philosophers Influenced the Founding Fathers' Thinking On Government

During the Enlightenment in the 1600s and 1700s, many political philosophers met and together discussed their ideas on government. The Enlightenment was a period in European history when many educated people stressed the importance of learning and reasoning. Education was considered the key to understanding and solving society's problems. Among the most influential philosophers were John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Baron de Montesquieu.

One of the first philosophes was **Thomas Hobbes**, an Englishman who concluded in his famous book, *Leviathan* that people are incapable of ruling themselves, primarily because humans are naturally self-centered and quarrelsome and need the iron fist of a strong leader.

Locke Develops the "Contract Theory" of Government. **John Locke**, an English political philosopher, helped to further develop democratic ideas. In 1690 Locke published the *First and Second Treatises on Government*. These two books explained Locke's contract theory of government.

According to Locke, the Magna Carta (signed in 1215) and English Bill of Rights (1688) protected the inalienable, or natural, rights of all British citizens. Locke wrote that all people had the inalienable "right to life, liberty, and property." Locke believed that people created government and chose to be governed in order to live in an orderly society. In other words, government arose from an agreement, or contract, between the ruler and the ruled. Thus, a ruler only had power as long as he or she had the consent of the governed and protected peoples' basic rights to life, liberty, and property. If the government failed in this primary function, said Locke, the people have a right to get rid of that government and bring in a new one that will protect those basic rights. These ideas would come to have a profound influence on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

Montesquieu Suggests Limited Government. In his book on government, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), French political philosopher and lawyer **Baron de Montesquieu** developed practical suggestions for creating democratic governments. He stated the best way to ensure that the government protects the natural rights of citizens is to limit its powers. And the best way to limit government's powers is to divide the government's basic powers among a number of authorities.

By dividing powers between different branches or parts of the government, no one authority would have too much power. Montesquieu referred to this as a system of checks and balances. Montesquieu argued that the government of Britain was the model system. With a legislative branch to make laws (parliament), executive branch to carry out the laws (king), and judicial branch to interpret the laws (court system), he believed that over-concentration of power could be avoided.

Montesquieu was the most frequently quoted authority on government and politics in colonial pre-Revolution British America, cited more by the Founders than any source except the Bible.

Rousseau Expands the Contract Theory. In his book, *The Social Contract* (1762), Genevan philosopher and writer **Jean Jacques Rousseau** wrote about an ideal society. Contrary to Locke's theory, in this society people would form a community and make a contract with each other, not with a ruler. People would give up some of their freedom in favor of the needs of the majority. The community would vote on all decisions and everyone would accept the community decision (what Rousseau called "the general will")—that is, majority rules. He basically advocated direct democracy. When Rousseau wrote the *Social Contract*, there was not a society in the world with such a system. His vision of equality, popular participation in government, and promotion of the general welfare, however, was shared by American colonists and others.

The people who created the United States Constitution found great political wisdom in the past. The system of government in place in the United States combines Ancient Greek and Roman practices with ideas developed more than 1,000 years later in Europe. Most Americans living at the time the Constitution was written were familiar with Greek democracy, the Roman republic, the British parliamentary system, and the writings of Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu and others. The framers of the U.S. Constitution were deeply influenced by many ideas on government developed during the previous 2,000 years.

Name _____

1. Summarize IN YOUR OWN WORDS and discuss (four sentences minimum) the three most influential ideas of John Locke that contributed to democratic theory:

2. Summarize IN YOUR OWN WORDS and discuss (four sentences minimum) the two most influential ideas of Montesquieu that contributed to democratic theory:

3. Summarize IN YOUR OWN WORDS and discuss (four sentences minimum) the two most influential ideas of Rousseau that contributed to democratic theory.
