

# Could the American Revolution Have Happened Without the Age of Enlightenment?

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## Philosophy in the Age of Reason

In 1721 the *Persian Letters* by Charles de Secondat and Baron de Montesquieu gave them the tool to make humorous remarks and sharp criticisms about French society. These were published secretly because people were punished for criticizing the king. Their thoughts helped usher in the age of Enlightenment because they helped people to begin to question and think for themselves. Montesquieu referred to Several Political Philosophies creating discourse about the virtues of Government by People.

## Hobbes' on Social Contract

Thomas Hobbes produced his theory on the relationship between Government and the governed in his book *Leviathan* (1651). After observing the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and The English Civil War (1641-1651), in which King Charles I was beheaded, Hobbes determined that a Social Contract must exist between the Monarch and his subjects. The contract required the Prince to act in the interest of the People, but the People must submit to any "Divine Law" put forward by The Prince. Without such submission, chaos and war naturally ensue. Mobs rise against their sovereign and The Prince must subdue them to maintain order.

## John Locke on Social Contract

John Locke believed that all people have natural rights from birth such as life liberty and property. Furthermore, submission to Kings was not natural. In his article called *Two Treaties of Government* (1689), Locke states the principals. These same ideas are reflected in the United States Declaration of Independence.

1. Government is formed to protect people's natural rights.
2. Government should have limited power.
3. The type of government should be accepted by all citizens.
4. Rejected absolute monarchy and thereby sides with Parliament against the Stuart Kings.
5. Government has an obligation to those it governs.
6. People have the right to overthrow government if the it fails its obligations or takes away natural rights (revolution)

### Baron de Montesquieu

In 1748, Montesquieu wrote *The Spirit of the Laws*. This article described checks and balances on government by dividing the functions of power between three separate branches of government to protect liberty (freedom within the Law). We can see his ideas about separation of governmental powers reflected in the United States Constitution. The separate branches of government are the legislative, judiciary, and the executive.

### Voltaire

Voltaire or Francois-Marie Arouet(1694-1778), a polemic and prodigious writer and scientist, opened peoples' eyes to the corruption by officials and aristocrats through his biting satires. His writings allowed others to see the injustice of slave trade and religious prejudice. Our governments Declaration of Independence also reflects British government corruption which hurt the American colonies.

Voltaire's writings defend Freedom of Speech. He spent a good deal of time jailed in both the courts of Louis XIV of France and Frederick the Great of Prussia for his public criticism of their political power and Religion . He was supposed to have said, "I do not agree with a word that you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This is the Principle of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment: Freedom of Speech, Press, Assembly and Religion.

## Diderot

In 1751, Denis Diderot produced a 28 volume encyclopedias. His purpose for writing them was to change the general way of thinking by explaining the new thinking on government, philosophy, and religion. These encyclopedias were translated into other languages and spread Enlightenment ideas to the rest of the world and the American colonies. Diderot's ideas could have helped form the ideas for our government.

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau(1712-1778) was the champion of democracy because he believed that authority lies with the people. In *The Social Contract* written in 1762 Rousseau states:

1. Man is born free.
2. Controls by a freely formed government are benevolent.
3. Consent to a form of government means that the individual gives up self-interest in favor of the common good.
4. When government is by the consent of the governed the people retain their rights.

Rousseau put faith in the general will of the majority. He said that the majority should always work for the common good of the people. He hated political and economic oppression and supported revolt. Rousseau influenced thinkers for more than 200 years and influenced the writers of our Constitution..

## The Enlightenment

Enlightenment ideas helped open people's minds ("Dare to Know" being a battle cry) to a new way of thinking and not to except blindly the ways of the past. The Enlightenment *Philosophies*:

1. Challenged old ways of thinking.

2. Questioned divine-right of rule.
3. Taught that people should be able to gain material well-being, social justice, and happiness in this life, not just the next.
4. Relied on logic, rational thought and science, defying superstition. (Many Scholars proclaimed the new visions of Deism, Agnosticism, and Atheism, among many other new thoughts on religion)

### The Birth of the American Republic

1776, Thomas Paine, an Atheist Political revolutionary, wrote his *Common Sense* pamphlet which called American colonists to declare independence so they could have the freedoms brought by natural laws and end of ancient prejudice, religious superstition and tyranny. He believed in the themes of Enlightenment and wanted all men to join him in these beliefs.

The colonists had heated debates over the Enlightenment ideas of Thomas Paine, but finally they came to agree with them. They decided to declare their independence from England. This was because they felt they were entitled to the rights of English citizens, but they were not given these rights. Parliament passed new laws to raise taxes from the colonies. The colonists resented attacks on their rights. They wanted no taxation without representation. Since there was no representation in Parliament for the colonists, they felt that Parliament had no right to tax them. Parliament repealed some of the measures, but asserted its right to tax the colonists without their representation in that government.

In 1773, when the Boston Tea Party occurred, Parliament passed harsh laws to punish Massachusetts. This angered the colonies too. In 1776 the Continental Congress declared independence from Britain.

Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence which reflected primarily the ideas of John Locke and other Enlightened thinkers. These were:

1. Unalienable or natural rights: Life, Liberty and Property, or as Jefferson eloquently translated, "Pursuit of Happiness"
2. Government set to protect personal rights.
3. Government gaining power from consent of those it governs.
4. The people had the right to abolish an unjust government.

The Declaration of Independence, adopted on July 4 1776 stated that:

1. Britain had taken away the American colonists natural rights.
2. The people had the right to abolish an unjust government
3. They had the right to set up a new government that would protect them.

While the American Declaration of Independence is only a Creed of American beliefs, and NOT law, it is a Manifesto of modern government, by the People, a very radical approach to government in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Impact of Enlightenment Ideas on the Constitution

The writers of our Constitution professed the ideas of Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Wars of empire and religious doctrine, denial of private property, witch hunts, and the tyranny of the Divine Right of Kings inspired the masses to consider a "New World Order." They used the Enlightenment ideas of Social Contract to set up the government, to be governed by the people to preserve their natural rights for the good of the whole.

Federal government was separated into three branches which according to Montesquieu would provide checks and balances to those holding seats of power. Ultimately, these checks would protect the People.

The Bill of Rights containing the first 10 amendments to the US Constitution recognize that people have basic rights that government must protect. Ratification of the Constitution, written by an Aristocracy of educated, wealthy land holders, would have

been impossible without such guaranteed protections. The Bill of Rights protects the People by ensuring:

1. Freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly and petition of grievance.
2. A well regulated militia, and the right to keep and bear arms.
3. Protection from quartering of troops in Peace time.
4. Protection from search and seizure without warrant of probable cause.
5. Protection from self incrimination, and double jeopardy, as well as protection of life, liberty and property without due process of law.
6. A speedy, public trial of Peers, in which accusations and witnesses against the accused must confront him, with witnesses and counsel in his defense.
7. Any civil case over \$20 shall have a jury and cannot be re-examined without due process of law.
8. Protection from excessive bail, excessive fines and cruel and unusual punishment.
9. Rights shall not be used to deny rights of others.
10. Powers not in the Constitution will be left to the States and their People.

The US Constitution set up a representative government with elected legislature to do the will of the people.

It is believed that without the age of Enlightenment the Revolution may never have taken place. If it did it could be assumed that the form of government we have would not have been as good without the ideas put forth by the Enlightenment.

### **Reference**

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