

Influences on American Government

The most important documents in American history—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—were influenced by the Enlightenment and by other documents from history. Below is a lesson discussing these philosophies and documents.

The Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment refers to the time period from the mid-1600s to about 1800. Also known as the **Age of Reason**, people began to place emphasis on reason and logic. These ideas grew in importance particularly in the fields of science, politics, and social theories. Enlightenment ideas embraced **individualism**, or the idea that each individual has value, deserves dignity, and is born with **natural rights**. They also encouraged **rationalism**—the idea that humans should find truth through reason and logic. Free speech and tolerance for other ways of life also became important ideas during this time.

Influencing the Declaration of Independence

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

The Declaration of Independence was drafted with the purpose of announcing and justifying the separation of the American colonies from Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence reflects many Enlightenment principles, including:

- Everyone has natural rights (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness).
- The government cannot take away certain rights.
- The government gets its power from the people through the "consent of the governed."
- It is the job of government to ensure the people's safety and happiness.
- Logical appeals to justice and reason should be considered.

John Locke

Some of the principles of the declaration have their origins in the philosophy of **John Locke**, a noted Enlightenment thinker who wrote that people were born with **natural rights** to life, liberty (freedom), and property. Locke argued that if a government does not protect those rights, the citizens have the right or even the obligation to overthrow the government. Also

important in John Locke's writing was the idea of the "social contract." The social contract between government and the people requires individuals to give up some rights (such as privacy) in order to have other rights (like safety) protected by law.

Common Sense

The declaration also used language from **Thomas Paine's** pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which attacked the wrongdoings of the English monarchy. Paine argued that it was in the colonies' best interest to separate from England. It, along with Paine's other writings, had a great influence on the American colonies. Its language served as one of the origins of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but it was more narrowly focused on attacking England and the king.

Influencing the Constitution

The United States Constitution was heavily influenced by many Enlightenment ideals and demonstrates these principles through the way it organizes the government. For example:

- The constitution divides the government into three branches: the judicial branch, the executive branch, and legislative branch. The responsibilities and power of governing is divided among the branches of government in order to keep one branch from becoming too powerful. Similarly, each branch has the ability to check the power of the other branches. The ideas of **separation of powers** and **checks and balances** were advocated by Charles Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*.
- The constitution also sets limits on government power and gives political power to the people by allowing them to elect government officials. This idea is known as **limited government**.
- Support for equality and individualism encouraged the growth of the rule of law, which is a democratic principle that all members of society are bound by the same laws.

Magna Carta

Signed in 1215 in England, the Magna Carta was the first expression of the principle that leaders, even kings, are not above the law. The charter established that governments must obey the law when dealing with citizens. One of its enduring concepts is the right to a speedy trial. The Magna Carta set a precedent for written laws and served as a model for later documents such as the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the English Bill of Rights.

Mayflower Compact

The Mayflower Compact was written in 1620 by a group of Pilgrim settlers. The Compact established a "social contract" between the settlers and their early government, forming the basis for the concept of "consent of the governed" in the U.S. Constitution.

Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*

Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* influenced the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. He felt this was the best way to protect citizens from a tyrannical government.

English Bill of Rights

Created in 1689, the English Bill of Rights served as a model for the United States Bill of Rights. They share several principles, including the right to bear arms, freedom of speech, and freedom from cruel and unusual punishment. Patrick Henry, a leading Anti-Federalist, was very influential in the adoption of the U.S. Bill of Rights.