

### The Enlightenment

While the scientists put forth revolutionary ideas, the philosophers and social critics had a revolution of their own. The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries focused on the role of mankind in relation to government, ideas which greatly influenced people all over the world.

While the Enlightenment was a broad intellectual movement, many of its leading thinkers were French. The Enlightenment thinkers are known collectively as *philosophes*, the French word for philosophers. They developed new ideas on government, economics and religion.

The philosophes shared the Enlightenment's faith in the supremacy of reason, believing that people, through the use of their reason, could find answers to their questions and solutions to their problems. Reason could be used to reveal the natural laws that regulated human affairs. Once these natural laws were discovered, the institutions of society could be reformed to bring them more in accordance with the natural order. Many influential writers focused on studying characteristics of society and people to help solve many world problems.

1. How did the Enlightenment change political and social thought?
2. How important is reason to the Enlightenment?

### Enlightenment Philosophers

During the seventeenth century the idea of the social contract emerged. The social contract held that governments were not formed by divine decree, but were formed to meet the social and economic needs of the governed. Supporters of this theory reasoned that because individuals existed before governments did, governments should meet the needs of the people, not the other way around.

In his work, *The Leviathan* (1651) Thomas Hobbes of England wrote that people were naturally cruel, greedy and selfish. He proposed the idea of government as a social contract in which people gave up their rights to a ruler in order to obtain law and order. Hobbes concluded that the best form of government was an absolute monarchy

John Locke was another influential Enlightenment thinker based out of England. Locke inspired the American Revolution with his ideas. In *Two Treatises on Government* (1690), Locke wrote that all men are born with the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. He also stated that governments exist to protect these rights, and that governments who fail to protect these rights may be overthrown.

1. What is the social contract?
2. What was Hobbes' main point?
3. What are Locke's two main ideas?

The French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) had a famous quote, "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." He campaigned for freedom of religion and speech. Another French philosopher, Baron de Montesquieu advocated a government that provided for separation of powers and a system of checks and balances. Both of these concepts were written into the United States Constitution.

The ideas of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau took the social contract theory to its furthest extreme. In his work, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau supported the ideas of a direct democracy. He argued that all men were equal and that society should be organized according to the majority rule of the people. Under this philosophy, the individual is protected by the society, but is also free, because freedom is the ability to obey the laws that people prescribe for themselves. His ideas inspired the French Revolution, other revolutions in European colonies and the anti-slavery movement.

Virtually all of the important French philosophes, including Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, were among the 160 contributors to the *Encyclopedia*, edited by Denis Diderot. The *Encyclopedia* was both a compendium for knowledge and a means for spreading radical ideas on government, economics, religion, philosophy, and other subjects. Despite the opposition of state and church authorities, more than twenty-eight volumes of the *Encyclopedia* were published.

1. What were Montesquieu's and Voltaire's contributions to the U.S Constitution?
2. Explain Rousseau's social contract.

### The Enlightened Despots

Some of Europe's absolute monarchs embraced reforms in their respective countries. These enlightened despots as they were called, maintained that the monarch must rule with the welfare of his subjects and that state foremost in his or her policies.

Frederick the II also known as Frederick the Great, was King of Prussia from 1740-1786. Frederick II exerted tight control over his subjects. Still he saw himself as the "first servant of the state", with a duty to work for the common good. He had swamps drained and forced peasants to grow new crops. He also tolerated religious differences and welcomed victims of religious prosecution. His reforms were directed mainly at making the Prussian government more efficient which helped make him more powerful as well.

Catherine the Great accepted the ideas of the Enlightenment. She was in contact with Voltaire and praised him. Catherine became empress of Russia in 1762 and she made limited reforms in law and government. She granted nobles more rights and criticized the institution of serfdom. But like Frederick she intended to give up no power. She joined with the Kings of Austria and Prussia and participated in the First Partition of Poland in 1772, in which the three countries seized a slice of Polish territory. This was followed by two more partitions and soon Poland was completely dissolved among the three empires. In the end, Catherine's contribution to Russia was not reform but expansion.

Joseph II was King of Austria and considered the most radical enlightened despot. Joseph II would disguise himself as a peasant and wander his empire to find out about the peoples problems. For this he was known as the "peasant emperor." He set out to reform Austria by first granting religious toleration to Jews and Protestants. He also ended censorship and gave people freedom of the press. Joseph II took Church lands and monasteries, sold them and used the profits to built hospitals. He also abolished serfdom in his empire; however these reforms were all reversed after his death

1. Why are these rulers considered enlightened despots?
2. What were some changes made by Catherine the Great?

### The Separation of Powers

In every government there are three sorts of power; the legislative; the executive, in respect to things dependent on the law of nations; and the executive, in regard to things that depend on the civil law.

By virtue of the first, the prince or magistrate enacts temporary or perpetual laws, and amends those that have been already enacted. By the second, he makes peace or war, sends or receives embassies; establishes the public security, and provides against invasions. By the third, he punishes criminals, or determines the disputes that arise between individuals. The latter we shall call the judiciary power, and the other simply the executive power of the state.

The political liberty of the subject is a tranquility of mind, arising from the opinion each person has of his safety. In order to have this liberty, it is requisite the government be so constituted as one man need not be afraid of another.

When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, or in the same body of magistrates, there can be no liberty; because apprehensions may arise, lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws, to execute them in a tyrannical manner.

Again, there is no liberty, if the power of judging be not separated from the legislative and executive powers. Were it joined with the legislative, the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control, for the judge would then be the legislator. Were it joined to the executive power, the judge might behave with all the violence of an oppressor.

There would be an end of every thing if it were the same man, or the same body, whether of the nobles or of the people to exercise those three powers that of enacting laws, that of executing the public resolutions, and that of judging the crimes or differences of individuals.

Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*

1. What are the three branches of government?
2. What happens when power is in the hands of one combined person or body?
3. Based on this reading, what kind of government would Montesquieu favor? Why?

### Ideas of the Enlightenment

#### Thomas Hobbes (England 1588-1679)

Hobbes believed that people were basically cruel, greedy and selfish. He stated that if there no harsh laws, life would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. People should give up their rights to an absolute ruler to ensure the safety of the nation.

1. What type of government would Hobbes support? Why?

#### John Locke (England 1632-1704)

Locke believed that people had natural rights, including life, liberty and property. If governments or rulers are corrupt or unjust, the people have the right to overthrow them.

1. What type of government would Locke support? Why?

#### Baron de Montesquieu (France 1689-1755)

“When the powers of the government are united in the same person, or in the same body, there can be no liberty.”

1. What does this statement mean?

#### Voltaire (France 1694-1778)

“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

1. What ideas would Voltaire’s statement support?

#### Jean Jacques Rousseau (France 1712-1778)

“Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.”

1. What does this statement means?

#### Adam Smith (England 1700-1780)

“Poor peasants make a poor kingdom.”

1. What does this statement mean?