

Maryland Society, Sons of the American Revolution Third Place Essay Winner (Tie)

The Enlightenment

The Inspiration for the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution

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Historically, when people have formed a government they have tended to be focused on personal power and control. The founding fathers came to realize how successful a country could be if its government worked for the benefit of the people and not for the selfish interests of the leaders. This thinking would not have been likely if it were not for the philosophers of the “European Enlightenment”.

The period from approximately 1600-1800 A.D. is often referred to as the “Age of Enlightenment” in Europe, because it is recognized as the critical period in the development of modern western philosophical thought.¹ This period in time is normally studied as two sub-periods, beginning with the “Age of Reason” (1600-1700 A.D.), when the people of Europe tried to escape the mind control, that their leaders from both church and state had over them.²

This struggle to win freedom of thought occurred in several areas. Science and mathematics were two areas of extensive censorship and repression, and consequently was an area of particular difficulty. Religion, itself, was another area of conflict, as religious leaders felt the need to be free to pursue an improved philosophical understanding of the relationship between god and man. The fourth area of major debate involved social problems and government abuses of the people. The citizens dared to argue that they had certain inherent rights, which the government had not respected.³

The second sub-period was known as “The Enlightenment” (1700-1800 A.D.). During this period, conditions in Europe had reached the point where the ruling class lived in extreme self-indulgence, while unemployment, disease, and starvation were running rampant across their lands. The worst example of this was in France in the mid-1700s, which explains why the majority of enlightenment writers in that time frame seem to come from France. It also explains why the people eventually rose up in the French Revolution, and executed everyone from the ruling class that they could get their hands on.⁴

The importance of the enlightenment period in the formation of the U.S. government and Constitution lies in the degree of influence, that enlightenment period philosophies had upon the

founding fathers, as they were in the process of creating the form of government, which the United States would eventually adopt.⁵

Some examples of enlightenment philosophers, who most influence the founding fathers, include **Denis Diderot (1713-1784)**, who was the French Founder and primary editor of the *Encyclopedie*, “which attempted to capture all human knowledge of that time into one document”. The *Encyclopedie* included twenty-eight volumes, seventeen in text, and eleven in illustration form. They were published one at a time, from 1751 to 1772. One of his objectives was to capture and preserve all of the important philosophical ideas of the time. Most importantly, the book didn’t just offer facts, but included space for recognized philosophers to explain their own thoughts and ideas. The *Encyclopedie* became a single, complete source, capturing and presenting the ideas of the most influential philosophers of the time. As a result, and of greatest importance to the enlightenment period, these volumes became the vehicle for the spread of enlightenment philosophies and theories around the world. In addition, Diderot added his own influential discussions on free will and the right to personal possessions.⁴

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) was an English historian best known for his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, where he contributed discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of different types of governments.¹

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher who spent considerable time in describing the relationship between the state and its people, as being contractual in nature. Thomas Jefferson was heavily influenced by Locke when he argued that a violation of the natural rights of the people by the state “negates the contract which binds a people to their rules”, and that therefore “there is an inherent right to revolution”. Locke’s most influential work was published within two documents known as the *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). Within those works, Locke argued that “every man is inherently good but necessity of government requires that people compromise on some issues for the betterment of the whole”. He also put forth his ideas for an ideal government and made suggestions, that hinted at the value of a separation of powers doctrine, which was the foundation for the full development of this idea by Montesquieu.⁶

Barron De Montesquieu (1689-1755) was a French political thinker famous for developing clear statements on the theories of “separation of powers” and “checks and balances” in government. His best known expression of these ideas was published in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748).⁴

Voltaire was the pen name for **Francios-Marie Arouet (1694-1778)**, who was the prime satirist of the enlightenment period. He contributed influential discussion on the importance of intellectual freedom and of the separation of church and state. He also emphasized the importance of reason over superstition and intolerance.⁴

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a French political philosopher who is best known for writing *Du Contrat Social*, where he puts forth the idea that “Citizens of a state must take part in creating a ‘social contract’”, which lays out the ground rules and limits upon government “in order to form an ideal where the people can be free from arbitrary power”.⁷

The philosophies of the enlightenment movement had a profound impact on political discussion in the thirteen colonies. There were a number of prominent Americans who played key roles in the transfer of these ideas from Europe to the New World. Among these was **Benjamin Franklin (1709-1790)**, who traveled back and forth between Europe and the colonies frequently, and who personally interacted with European enlightenment thinkers.⁸

Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was an Englishman who immigrated to America, bringing enlightenment philosophies with him. He was best known for publishing the political pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), which greatly influenced the decision of colonial leadership to declare independence from England.²

The influence of the enlightenment period is easy to see within the documents of our government's formation. The Declaration of Independence borrows heavily from Locke and Rousseau. The U.S. Constitution implements, almost word-for-word, Locke's and Montesquieu's ideas of separation of power. "America was founded as a deist country, giving credit to some manner of natural God, yet allowing diverse religious expression", an idea central to the enlightenment philosophy of Europe.⁸

Even though the enlightenment period caused massive conflict, extensive suffering, and fueled wars, the rewards that resulted from it all left the western world with hopes and potentials that they had never had before. "The movement resulted in greater freedom, greater opportunity, and generally more humane treatment for all individuals. Although the world still had a long way to go, and indeed still does, the enlightenment arguably marked the first time that western civilization truly became civilized".⁸

Footnotes

1. **Wikipedia.** *Age of Enlightenment*
2. **Paine.** "Age of Reason"
3. **Collier's Encyclopedia.** *The Enlightenment; Criticism and Reconstruction*
4. **SparkNotes.** *Enlightenment: Section 3*
5. **Rosen.** *James Madison and the problem of founding*
6. **SparkNotes.** *Enlightenment: Section 2*
7. **Kenny.** *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*
8. **SparkNotes.** *Enlightenment: Section 7*

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<http://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/enlightenment/section7.rhtml>

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<http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/AgeofEnlightenment>

Biography

Megan Burr is a senior currently attending Bohemia Manor High School in Chesapeake City, Maryland. She is an honor roll student participating in numerous activities including softball Girl Scouts, ballet, jazz and tap dancing, soccer and gymnastics. She anticipates attending a liberal arts college and majoring in English or creative writing to prepare her for a career as a novelist.