

# The american enlightenment

[History](#)



The Start of Our Nation “ Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. ” Located in our United States Declaration of Independence, these are the words that were written by Thomas Jefferson. He is indeed the author of our declaration to gain independence against Great Britain. But what if these words did not come straight from Jefferson? Looking at the big picture, what if our whole constitution and government is based on ideas that were discovered, preached, and outlawed around that time? The Enlightenment Period (around the seventeenth and eighteenth century) changed the ideas of how we should create a stable and new type of government.

The man that started this beloved period was named John Locke. The ideas of John Locke and the Enlightenment Period caused a few philosophers and people who were outspoken about freedoms and rights to shape the American government. Locke was raised in Britain, and across the English Channel most of Europe was not following Great Britain. Most governments at that time were absolute monarchies, which means the King had complete control over all of the country. What made Britain was so different was after an England Civil War. This is when the King of England, King Charles, was in disagreement with the nobles about how much power he should have.

The country broke out into a civil war and the nobles, led by Oliver Cromwell, won the war and beheaded Charles (Klekowski). Seeing all this, Locke’s love for democracy was created. Living in a newly created constitutional monarchy, On the side of the nobles, Locke spoke out for a type of government that did not have the King do everything (Philosophy Timeline). He wanted all the citizens to have rights, and uphold these rights, which was

not the normal thing in the time era. Locke's ideas led him to write a book called *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In this book, he shared with the public the Social Contract Theory. This is the theory that as citizens it is the citizen's duty to rid yourself of the government if the government is unfair towards the citizens (Uzgalis). This belief was no surprise because that is what they did in the English Civil War. Natural Law is another theory of Locke; if you are a person, natural laws should come with being alive like free speech and religious tolerance. He also attempted to prove to the kings and churches that divine right, which means the king has right because he has holy blood and is appointed by God, is not in the Bible at all (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). His quote summed everything up by saying people deserve " Life, liberty, and the right of property" (Uzgalis). His second book was titled *Common Place Book*, and was all about religious tolerance. Each one of his books shared his opinion and ideas on citizens rights. On his exile to England, the famous or infamous (depending where you lived) Voltaire learned and studied about these books. This French philosopher, whose real name was Francois-Marie Arouet, was exiled for writing satirical comments about a rich noble in Paris.

After reading Locke's writings and studying the type of government that Great Britain had, Voltaire never quit insulting France (Shank). He spoke out about the type of rule that France had, disagreeing with how much control and rule the Catholic Church had. People had to pay money to get into heaven, and to pay for the loved ones in purgatory. He wanted religious tolerance in France and wanted religion to become separate from the

government. This argument ended up being Voltaire against the French government and that is what made everything he wrote so popular.

He would write plays and books in a satirical manner so they could not prosecute him. Overall, he fought against absolute monarchy and the Catholic Rule of France. Voltaire changed the way many people looked at Absolute Monarchy. If you did not read or learn about Locke's Social Contract Theory during this Enlightenment Period, then you probably heard it from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His books shared information covering a wide variety of subjects. He was a well rounded writer, philosopher, and scientist. A man mainly influenced by Locke, Rousseau changed the way political philosophy was looked at.

He preached all the things that Locke had spoken about but focused on one thing in particular. He wanted a republic (Philosophy timeline). He wanted a fair way to live, own a business, and have government rule. Like Locke, Rousseau did not like an absolute monarchy and made his views known publicly. Fighting for separation of powers, he took on the government's "one person rule" head on (Mills). His books shared information covering a wide variety of subjects. He was a well rounded writer, philosopher, and scientist. But all these philosophers were from Europe, where does America come into this?

How can these men influence a country that is across the Atlantic Ocean? The American colonies had a philosopher of their own: Thomas Jefferson. And he was a genius during his time. From creating a plow to creating a macaroni noodle maker, Jefferson was doing it all (Thomas Jefferson Facts). He also worked politically, attempting to give the colonies independence from their

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English ruler. During this time, the English and American people were in a war. Because of the way England taxed them, the Americans fought to become a new nation. Thomas Jefferson wrote The Declaration of Independence, an article against England's rule.

The ideas of Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau filled this historic document. The start of The Declaration of Independence even begins with an Enlightenment statement: When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them. The words, " Course of human events" and " separate and equal station" all involve Enlightenment statements.

They are using Locke's idea that every human has a given right, and The Declaration of Independence list the rights that they have and that England has broken. Jefferson changed Locke's original quote " Life, liberty, and the right of property" (Philosophy timeline). He liked how it showed what the citizens should fairly have. This Declaration of Independence was an important and monumental document, but the United States Constitution is what we still follow today. This document, the oldest of its kind, also followed very enlightened ideas. Within this document, Rousseau's idea of separation of power was included.

Still working today, we have three branches: The Legislative, the Executive, and the Judicial branch. Rousseau fought for that because he was against an absolute monarchy. Later on, the Bill of Rights was added on to the Constitution. The First Amendment in this Bill of Rights. Voltaire fought for <https://assignbuster.com/the-american-enlightenment/>

Religious freedom which showed up in the First Amendment. Freedom of speech is also something Voltaire wanted. He wanted to create plays without having to worry about what the government would say. The other parts of the Bill of Rights are enlightened ideas that have branched off the ideas of these three men.

These men have changed the way our country is run. Even though they were not a part of America, they took part in the Enlightenment, starting and continuing to change the way we live for all citizens. Whether it was Locke's civil rights, or Voltaire's religious freedom, each important idea that has come from the Enlightenment has created a government for us. It fills our government full of freedoms. Living in America, I use my rights every day, practicing my religion, speaking out about topics I believe in, and it looks like the ideas those men have shared will continue to be used for a lifetime.

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