Impact of the Enlightenment on American Democracy

One of the most important philosophers to focus on political subjects was an Englishman named John Locke, who lived from 1632 to 1704. Locke believed that the power of a government to rule must come from the consent of the governed; in other words, that people should be able to choose who governs them. He promoted the idea that every human being was born with three basic natural rights: those of life, political equality (or liberty), and the ownership of property. Locke also promoted freedom of the press, educational reform, religious tolerance, and called for the overthrow of governments that failed to protect basic human rights.

In France, several great Enlightenment philosophers wrote passionately about human rights and democracy, as well. French philosopher Voltaire, for example, championed the idea of freedom of speech with his famous statement, "I disapprove of what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it," while another Frenchman, Montesquieu, called for a complete separation of powers to maintain balance in government—to be accomplished by creating separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

Nearly all philosophers of the Enlightenment era wanted to see a strict separation of church and state, as well, for they realized that mixing government and religion was almost always a recipe for disaster. The Enlightenment philosophers themselves were usually deists, people without traditional religious beliefs, who believed in what they called "Nature's God," that is an all-powerful spiritual force that had created the universe and everything in it, but had then left it alone.

The ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers were deeply admired by the leaders of both the American and French Revolutions. In fact, Thomas Jefferson depended on them time and time again when he was composing the Declaration of Independence, as did the framers of United States Constitution when they worked out a plan of government for the new American democracy.

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| Philosopher | Main Ideas |
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