

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a cultural movement of intellectuals in late 17th century-18th century Europe and the United States, whose purpose was to reform society and advance knowledge through reason and logic. It promoted individual thought and reasoning, scrutiny of traditional ideas, and undermined allegiance to traditional authority. The ideals promoted by various intellectuals inspired many American patriots, including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin.



John Locke: An English philosopher, he expressed the idea that people are born free and equal with basic, “natural rights”. In *Two Treatises of Government*, he describes these rights to include the right to life, liberty, and property. Locke asserted that a government that does not protect these “natural rights” must be overthrown by the people. His words would later inspire Thomas Jefferson as he wrote the Declaration of Independence, in his phrasing of Americans’ right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”



Baron de Montesquieu: A French writer and philosopher, he argued in his book, *The Spirit of Laws*, that power should not be held by one man alone, but separated amongst several branches. He also believed in checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power by one person or group within the government. In the United States, these ideas would be implemented in the very structure of its government – three equal branches (legislative, executive, judicial) that had the ability to check (limit) the power of the others.



Jean Jacques Rousseau: A French philosopher, he believed in the natural goodness of people, and their unlimited ability to learn and develop. In his renowned work, *The Social Contract*, he promoted individual freedom, and that the authority and power of the people (known as *popular sovereignty*) is essential to the creation of a just government. The earliest American governments supported the idea of democracy, and further established the people’s ultimate authority in the opening phrase of its Constitution, “*We the People*.”



Voltaire: A French playwright, historian, and author, he advocated civil liberties, including freedom of religion, freedom of expression, free trade and separation of church and state. Through satire, he would criticize intolerance, religious dogma, and the excesses of French nobility. His most famous quote is, “*I do not agree with a word you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it.*” His ideas would later be reflected in the First Amendment to the Constitution – freedom of speech and religion.



Cesare Beccaria: An Italian philosopher, he promoted new ideas about justice. He was staunchly opposed to torture, and believed people accused of crimes still maintained their basic natural rights. Beccaria promoted speedy trials and that punishment should be proportional to the crime committed. His beliefs on criminal justice can be found in five of the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, most clearly in the Fifth Amendment (rights of the accused, right to a public and speedy trial) and Eighth Amendment (prohibition of “cruel and unusual punishment”).



Mary Wollstonecraft: Referring to Locke’s belief on natural rights, Wollstonecraft is best known for saying, “*If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?*” A British philosopher and author, she maintained that women were human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men. Best known for her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education. She suggests that both men and women should be treated as equally rational beings. Although not enacted into national law until 1920, her ideas would ignite the women’s suffrage (voting) movement, and promote the education of women, as seen in the establishment of women’s colleges (e.g. Mount Holyoke College) in the 18th and 19th centuries.