European Philosophers and Documents Influence on American Government

During the Enlightenment, in the 1600s and 1700s, many political philosophers met and discussed their ideas on government together. The Enlightenment was a period in European history when many educated people stressed the importance of learning and reasoning. Education was considered the key to understanding and solving society's problems. Many Enlightenment thinkers lived in Paris. These thinkers were known as philosophes, the French word for one who searches for wisdom and knowledge. Among the most influential philosophers were John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Baron de Montesquieu.

Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan
One of the first philosophes was Thomas Hobbes, an Englishman who concluded in his famous book, LEVIATHAN (1651), that people are incapable of ruling themselves, primarily because humans are naturally self-centered and quarrelsome and need the iron fist of a strong leader. Later philosophers, like Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau were more optimistic about democracy. Their ideas encouraged the questioning of absolute monarchs.

Locke Develops the "Contract Theory" of Government.
John Locke, an English political philosopher, published the First and Second Treatises on Government (1690). These two books explained Locke's contract theory of government. According to Locke, the Magna Carta and Bill of Rights protected the inalienable [undisputable], or natural, rights of all British citizens. Locke wrote that all people had the inalienable "right to life, liberty, and property." Locke believed that people created government and chose to be governed in order to live in an orderly society. In other words, government arose from an agreement, or contract, between the ruler and the ruled. Thus, a ruler only had power as long as he or she had the consent of the governed. And, as a result, a ruler could not justly deny peoples' basic rights to life, liberty, and property.

Rousseau Expands the Contract Theory.
In his book, *The Social Contract*, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about an ideal society. In this society, people would form a community and make a contract with each other, not with a ruler. People would give up some of their freedom in favor of the needs of the majority. When Rousseau wrote *The Social Contract*, there was not a society in the world with such a system. His vision was shared by American colonists and others.

**Montesquieu Suggests Limited Government.**

In his book on government, *The Spirit of Laws*, Baron de Montesquieu developed practical suggestions for creating democratic governments. He stated that the best way to ensure that the government protects the natural rights of citizens is to limit its powers.

The people who created the United States Constitution found great political wisdom in the past. The system of government in place in the United States combines Ancient Greek and Roman practices with ideas developed more than 1,000 years later in Europe. Most Americans living at the time the Constitution was written were familiar with Greek democracy, the Roman republic, the British parliamentary system, and the writings of Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu and others. The foundations of American government lie squarely in the 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment. The American founders were well versed in the writings of the philosophes, whose ideas influenced the shaping of the new country. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, and others took the brave steps of creating a government based on the Enlightenment values of liberty, equality, and a new form of justice. The Framers of the U.S. Constitution were deeply influenced by the many ideas on government developed during the previous 2,000 years.

**Important English Documents**

Ironically, the English political system provided the foundation for the revolt of its own American colonies. For many centuries, English monarchs had allowed restrictions to be placed on their ultimate power. The *Magna Carta*, written in 1215, established the belief that the monarch’s rule was not absolute. The document forced the King to consult nobles before he made arbitrary decisions like passing taxes; the Magna Carta
provided the basis for the later development of Parliament. Over the years, representative government led by a Prime Minister came to control and eventually replace the king as the real source of power in Britain.

The Mayflower Compact written by British colonists in 1620 and established the basis for government in the Plymouth colony. The document reflected the teachings of Enlightenment philosophers and formed the basis of the Constitution of the United States in 1789.

The Petition of Right (1628) and the English Bill of Rights (1689) extended the rights of "commoners" to have a voice in the government and guaranteed some rights of the citizen. Although King George III still had some real power in 1776, Britain was already well along on the path of democracy by that time.

1. Based on what you have read, how would each of the philosophers view the United States presidential elections? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
   
   a. Thomas Hobbes  
   b. John Locke  
   c. Jean Rousseau  
   d. Baron de Montesquieu

2. Examine the portraits of each of the philosophers. What inference can you make about the socio-economic class of these men? Cite evidence from the pictures to support your answer.

   Do you think this could have influenced their ideas about government? Why or Why not?

3. How did the Magna Carta encourage the formation of a representative government in Great Britain?

4. How are the English Bill of Rights and the United States Bill of Rights similar?