The Age of Reason

The Scientific Revolution helped start a new era called the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. People believed reason and logic could be used to study all areas of life, not just science. Scientists talked about the laws that govern nature, so philosophers looked for laws of human behavior. Some Enlightenment thinkers studied government and politics.

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were two English political thinkers who started the Enlightenment. Both men had seen the Civil War and political changes of England in the 1600s. However, they came up with two very different ideas about government and human nature.

After seeing the violence of the English Civil War, Thomas Hobbes believed that all humans were naturally selfish. He thought that the best government was one with total control over the people. Hobbes thought that people needed government to keep law and order. Without it, they would fight each other all the time. To avoid this type of life, people invented government and gave up their rights to a strong ruler. Hobbes said that this agreement was a social contract.

John Locke had different ideas about government. He thought that people were responsible beings who had the natural ability to govern themselves. Locke said all people were born equal and had three natural rights: life, liberty, and property. He believed that a government's job was to protect these rights. The best government had limited power and was accepted by all people. If a government did not protect its citizens' rights, citizens could overthrow the government. Locke's idea that a government's power came from its people was the beginning of modern democracy.

In France in the mid-1700s, the Enlightenment reached its height. The Baron de Montesquieu, a French writer, studied politics. He admired Britain's government and spent a lot of time studying it. In his book, *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu wrote about the British system of government. The book talked about the ideas of executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government; separation of powers; and checks and balances. Later, Americans used these ideas to write the U.S. Constitution.

The thinkers of the Age of Reason did not like old beliefs. They thought things like the divine right of kings and strict class systems were unreasonable. Enlightenment thinkers came up with new ideas about government, religion, economics, and society. These theories inspired the American and French Revolutions and other revolutions of the 1800s.

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Multiple Choice

Circle the best answer, and write the letter in the box.

☐ **1.** Philosophers of the Enlightenment wanted to use _____ in all areas of life.
   A. government
   B. economics
   C. politics
   D. reason

☐ **2.** _____ believed that without government, people would fight each other all the time.
   A. Locke
   B. Hobbes
   C. Montesquieu
   D. Smith

☐ **3.** Locke believed that a government's power came from its _____.
   A. army
   B. power
   C. people
   D. science

☐ **4.** Americans used _____'s ideas to write the U.S. Constitution.
   A. Montesquieu
   B. Hobbes
   C. Rousseau
   D. Voltaire

☐ **5.** Enlightenment thinkers and theories inspired _____.
   A. the French Revolution
   B. the American Revolution
   C. other revolutions of the 1800s
   D. all of the above