General Information

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Description

The writings of John Locke, a philosopher and political theorist of the Age of Enlightenment, would greatly influence the leaders of the American Revolution. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

Keywords


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John Locke, Natural Rights

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Transcript

John Locke, Natural Rights

NINA TERRERO reporting:

The great question of all ages, John Locke wrote in 1689, has been "not whether there be power in the world, nor whence it came, but who should have it."

Locke was one of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose revolutionary ideas would influence the 18th century's greatest political experiment - the American government.

Born in 1632, Locke lived through one of the most volatile times in England's history, with civil war, religious intolerance, and the awakenings of intellectual and scientific thought stirring up controversy.

Educated at Oxford, Locke became acquainted with scholars, scientists, and nobility, including the Earl of Shaftesbury, who introduced Locke into political circles during the Restoration of Charles II and would influence Locke's political ideas.

Locke opposed absolute monarchy and the theory of "divine right" of kings. In his influential work, Two Treatises on Government, Locke argued against the theory and offered an alternative idea on how and why a government is formed.

"To understand political power," wrote Locke, it must be recognized that people are born with natural, God-given rights to "life, liberty, and property."

Locke stated that people form social contracts in order to protect their rights, "agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community," and by their consent, create a legitimate government to act according to their will. Locke thought "no government can have a right to obedience from a people who have not freely consented to it."

If, after "a long train of abuses, prevarications, and artifices," the government fails in its duty, the people could withdraw consent and "endeavor to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the ends for which government was first erected."

A century later, the enlightened sparks of John Locke's philosophy were aflame in the American colonies. Thomas Jefferson and other leaders of the American Revolution were inspired by Locke's arguments for
natural rights, the consent of the governed, and the right to throw off a tyrannical government, all ideas reflected in the Declaration of Independence.

Other theories of Locke’s, including the separation of power and the separation of church and state, would find their way into the framing of the U.S. Constitution.

For the first time, a government would be formed to protect the unalienable rights of the people, with power granted by the people, and offering political redress for the people.

And the answer to the great question of the ages? Who should have the power? As Locke wrote, "this doctrine of a power in the people...is the best fence against rebellion."