ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHERS

America's Founding Fathers developed their ideas about government by studying philosophers who lived during the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Enlightenment thinkers believed that by studying the world around them and the way people lived, they could gain a true understanding of human nature and behavior. This understanding would help them fix the problems of society and create a better world to live in.

Thomas Hobbes
English philosopher, 17th century

Hobbes believed that strong governments were important to keep people from hurting one another. People entered into a social contract with the government for protection. Without strong governments, people lived in a "state of nature" where life was very, very hard.

John Locke
English philosopher, 17th century

Locke believed the people entered into a social contract and created governments to protect their natural rights, which are rights that we are all born with. Locke thought our natural rights included the rights to life, liberty, and property. These rights can never be taken away from the people.

John-Jacques Rousseau
French philosopher, 18th century

Rousseau believed that governments must be responsive to the "will of the people" or else the government is corrupt. Governments that do not work for the will of the people have broken the social contract and lost their authority to govern. He also argued that just governments must work for true equality among its citizens.

Montesquieu
French philosopher, 18th century

Montesquieu believed the power of the government must be divided among branches to keep the government from becoming too powerful. The different branches of government needed to have a means to check—or stop—the other branches from doing things that were not for the common good. By this means, the power of the government would be balanced across many different parts of the government.