

Locke, Stock and Barrel  
Locke's Impact on the American Revolution

"For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us..." John Winthrop, John Winthrop's City upon a Hill," circa 1630.

From the start, the colonies were formed to escape Great Britain's oppressive government. The colonists believed a new land founded in freedom would serve as a beacon of light to others across the world. This hope prompted the colonists to set forth their grievances against Great Britain, to declare their independence, and to adopt a new form of government based on individual rights. Significantly, our founding fathers relied heavily on the teachings of English political philosopher, John Locke, in setting forth the reasoning of their new democratic government. John Locke lived in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and commented on the duties and responsibilities of government in his now famous work, "Two Treatises of Government". While he died in 1704, well before the American Revolution, he indirectly championed American ideals and independence through his political writings on the rights of the people and the just and proper role of a government.

Locke believed that people create their governments to keep them safe, to improve their well-being, and to enforce on the natural laws. Locke argued that these natural laws, derived from God, provide for the preservation of one's Life, Liberty, and Possessions, which Thomas Jefferson changed to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. In his second treatise,

Locke described his idea for power sharing, stating that the Legislative and Executive Powers should be in distinct hands.<sup>5</sup> Locke believed in the use of a legislature that “is put into the hands of diverse persons who duly Assembled, have by themselves, or jointly with others, a Power to make Laws, which when they have done, being separated again, they themselves subject to the Laws, they have made.”<sup>6</sup> Locke’s “Social Contract Theory” that governments exist “to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” is also reflected in our founding documents.

Finally, Locke’s philosophy that man’s rights are derived from God is consistent with John Winthrop’s view and the repeated references to God in our founding documents. For instance, the Articles of Confederation references “the Great Governor of the World”<sup>7</sup> and the Declaration of Independence references “Nature’s God,” as the source of man’s rights. These beliefs enabled the newly formed United States to hold fast to the ideal of a more perfect union designed to form a bright, shining city on a hill.

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<sup>5</sup> Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Civil Government*. England: Little Book Publisher, 1690.

<sup>6</sup> Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Civil Government*. England: Little Book Publisher, 1690.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Articles of Confederation. Art XIII.