

# The Enlightenment & Democratic Revolutions

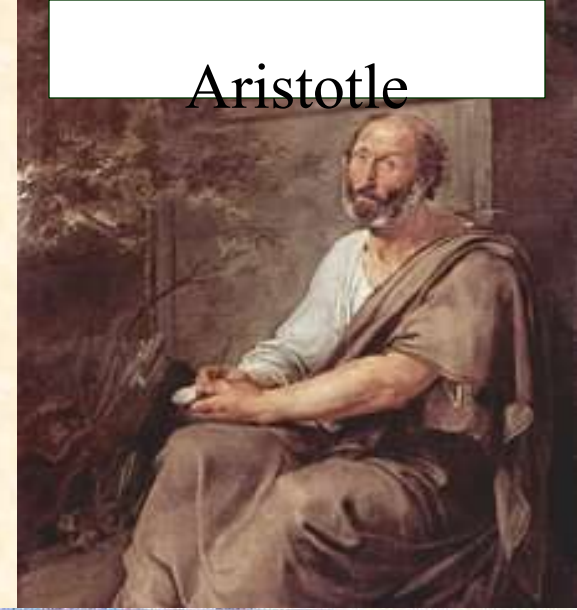
Enlightenment Ideas help bring about  
the American & French Revolutions

Before 1500, scholars generally decided what was true or false by referring to an ancient Greek or Roman author or to the Bible. Few European scholars challenged the scientific ideas of the ancient thinkers or the church by carefully observing nature for themselves.

The Medieval View – During the Middle Ages, most scholars believed that the earth was an immovable object located at the center of the universe. According to that belief, the moon, the sun, and the planets all moved in perfectly circular paths around the earth. Common sense seemed to support this view. After all, the sun appeared to be moving around the earth as it rose in the morning and set in the evening.

This earth centered view of the universe was called the geocentric theory. The idea came from Aristotle, the Greek philosopher of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The Greek astronomer Ptolemy (TOL a mee) expanded the theory in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. In addition, Christianity taught that God had deliberately placed the earth at the center of the universe. Earth was thus a special place on which the great drama of life unfolded.

Aristotle



Ptolemy

In the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, an intellectual movement called “The Enlightenment” developed. During this period, thinkers attempted to apply the principles of reason & the methods of science to all aspects of society.

The Scientific Revolution of the 1500's & 1600's was an even more immediate source of Enlightenment thought. New ideas about society & government developed out of it.

The Scientific Revolution caused thinkers to rely on their own reasoning instead of merely accepting traditional beliefs.

They wanted to apply the scientific method, which relied on observation & testing of theories, to human affairs. Methods used by individuals such as Isaac Newton, who discovered mechanical laws that govern the universe & the methods that go along with discovery



**Sir Isaac Newton's  
Laws (Laws of Inertia,  
Action & Reaction,  
Gravity, Laws of  
Lunar motion & tides)**

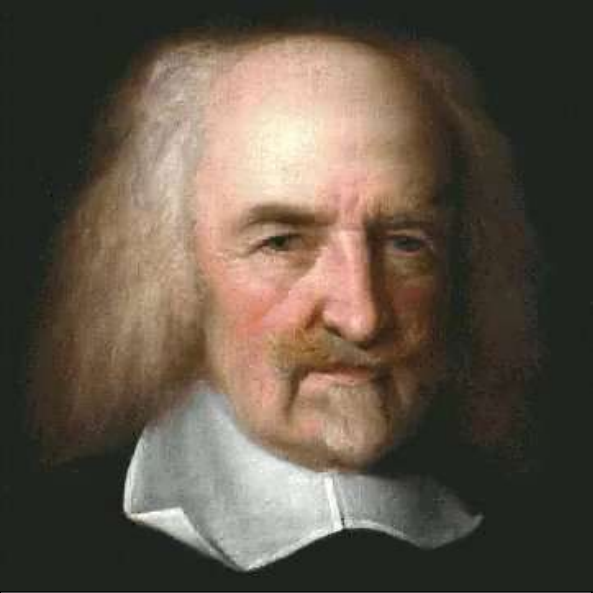


Newton Studied mathematics & physics at Cambridge University. By the time he was 26, Newton was certain that all physical objects were affected equally by the same forces. Newton's great discovery was that the same force ruled motion of the planets & all matter on earth & in space. The key idea that linked motion in the heavens with motion on the earth was the law of *universal gravitation*. According to this law, every object in the universe attracts every other object. The degree of attraction depends on the mass of the objects and the distance between them.

In 1687, Newton published his ideas in a work called the *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. It was one of the most important scientific books ever written. The universe he described was like a giant clock. Its parts all worked together perfectly in ways that could be expressed mathematically. Newton believed that God was the creator of this orderly universe, the clockmaker who had set everything in motion.



Sir Isaac Newton



Thomas Hobbes

Hobbes, the English philosopher who was influenced by the Scientific Revolution wrote a book entitled “Leviathan”, in which he gives his views on human nature. The horrors of the English Civil War convinced him that all people were by nature selfish & wicked & ambitious & the most appropriate kind of government for people was a monarchy. Without governments to keep order, he said there would be “war...of every man against every man,” & life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish & short.” He argued that to escape such a bleak life, people had to hand over their rights to a strong ruler.

In exchange , they gained law & order. Hobbes called this agreement by which people created a government the **SOCIAL CONTRACT**. Because people acted in their own self-interest, Hobbes said, the ruler needed total power to keep citizens under control. The best government was one that had the awesome power of a leviathan (sea monster). In Hobbes’s view, such a government was an absolute monarchy, which could impose order & demand obedience.

**Another early Enlightenment thinker, John Locke, had a more positive view on human nature. He believed that a governments most fundamental duty is to protect the rights of the people & that all human beings had, by nature, the right to life, liberty & property known as “Natural Rights”. He also said that people had an absolute right to rebel against a government that violated or failed to protect these rights. He believed that a government’s power comes from the people, not from God, therefore Kings did not have a “Divine Right”. His ideas inspired people & became cornerstones of modern democratic thought. Including the Declaration of Independence.**

John Locke



The Enlightenment reached its height in France in the mid-1700s. Paris became the meeting place for people who wanted to discuss politics & ideas. The social critics of this period in France were known as *Philosophes* (FIHL uh sahfs). The French word for philosophers. The philosophes believed that people could apply reason to all aspects of life, just as Isaac Newton had applied reason to science. Five concepts formed the core of their beliefs:

1. Reason – truth could be discovered through reason of logical thinking.

2. Nature – what is natural is also good & reasonable.

3. Happiness – they rejected the medieval notion that people should find joy in the hereafter & urged people to seek well-being on earth.

4. Progress – they stressed that society & humankind could improve.

5. Liberty – They called for the liberties that the English people had won in their Glorious Revolution and Bill of rights



## Other famous thinkers of the Enlightenment were Voltaire & Rousseau

Probably the most brilliant & influential of the philosophes was Francois Marie Arouet. Using the pen name Voltaire, he published more than 70 books of political essays, philosophy & drama. Voltaire argued in favor of tolerance, freedom of religion & free speech. He often targeted the French government & Christianity.



Voltaire



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Rousseau (roo SOH) was perhaps the most freethinker of the Enlightenment philosophers. His most famous work was *The Social Contract* (1762). In it, Rousseau advocated democracy. He called the social contract an agreement among free individuals to create a government that would respond to the people's will. He argued that legitimate government came from the consent of the governed. He argued that all people were equal & that titles of nobility should be abolished. His ideas inspired many of the leaders of the French Revolution who overthrew the monarchy in

1789



**Baron De Montesquieu**

Another French philosopher Montesquieu, also recognized liberty as a natural right. In *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), he points out that any person or group in power will try to increase its power.

Like Aristotle, he searched for ways to control government. He concluded that liberty could best be safeguarded by a separation of powers, that is, by dividing government into 3 separate branches.

- Legislative – to make laws
- Executive – to enforce them
- Judicial – courts interpret the laws

# The beginnings of Democracy in America

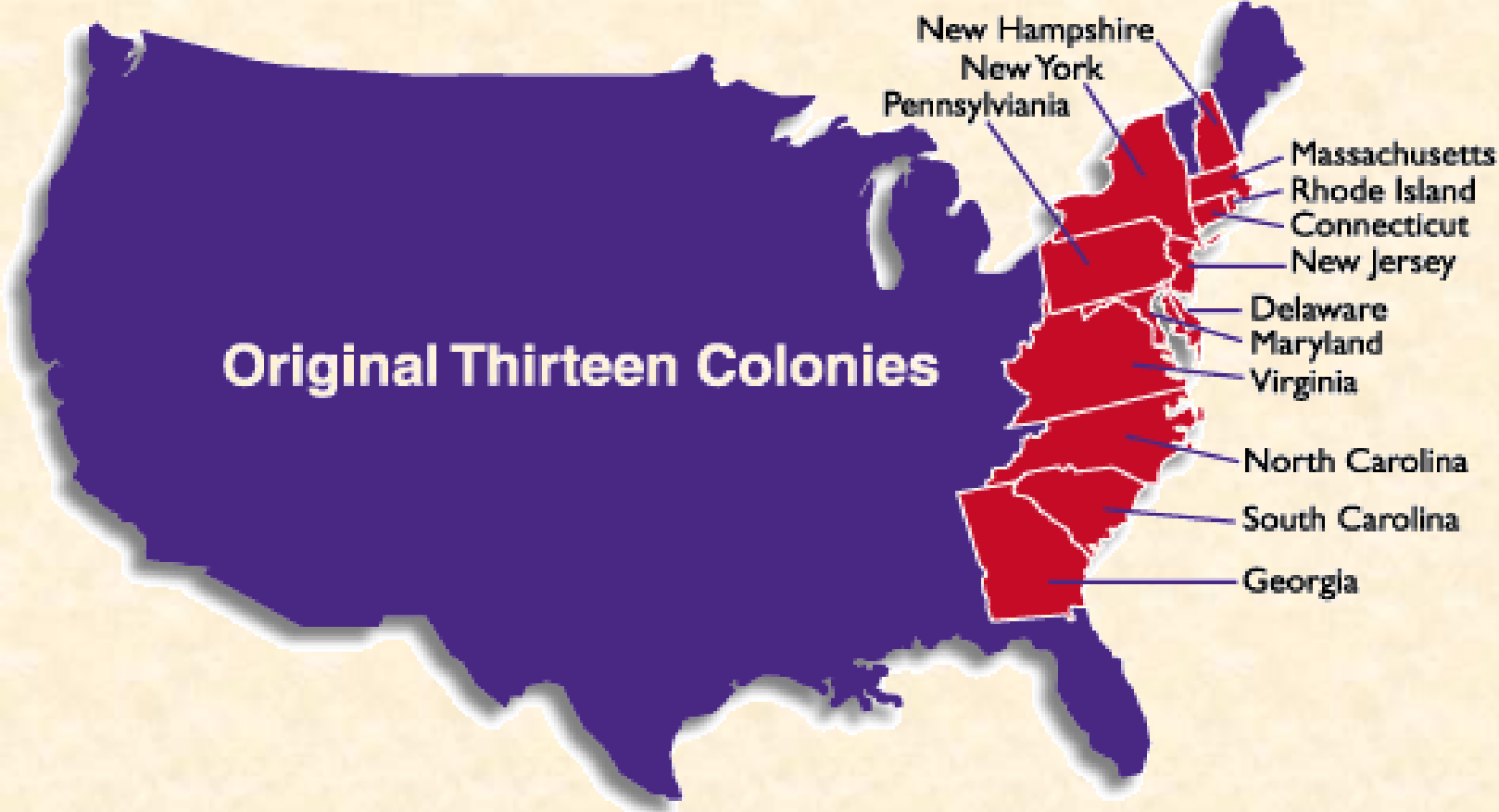
- Enlightenment ideas helped to shape the U.S. Constitution.
- By 1700's, there were 13 British colonies in North America & they were ruled from Britain
- France has colonies to the north & West of the 13 colonies
- 1754, Britain & France go to war for control of North America. Called The French & Indian War





The American colonists helped Britain defeat France in the French & Indian War, which ended in 1763. The war was costly & the British believed that the colonists should help pay for the war, so they taxed the colonists more than they were already taxing them. This was called the Stamp Act in 1765. The colonists protested that this was a violation of their rights as British citizens because

they were not represented in Parliament. Eventually, the colonists united & began to arm themselves against what they called British oppression. They fought for independence against Britain called the American Revolution.



For several years, the new nation existed as a loose federation, or union, of states under a plan of government called the Articles of Confederation. Americans had wanted a weak central government. They feared that a strong government would lead to the kind of tyranny they had rebelled against. They established one body, the Congress, which was weak because it did not have the power to collect taxes to pay war debts or to finance the government.



In the summer of 1787, a group of American leaders met in Philadelphia. They had been chosen by their state legislatures to frame, or work out a better plan of government. The result of their efforts was the Constitution of the United States.



First, they agreed to set up a Representative Government – one in which citizens elect representatives to make laws & policies for them.

Second, they created a Federal System. The powers of government were divided between the federal government & the states.

Third, within the federal government, they set up a Separation of Powers. Power was divided among the executive, legislative & judicial branches. This was to provide a system of checks & balances to prevent any branch from having too much power.