

Biography



Colonizing America, Prehistory to 1754

Governance and New Ideas

John Locke, 1632–1704

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is a phrase most people recognize. It is part of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, much of which was based on the writings of the English philosopher, John Locke.

Locke wrote about the relationship of government and the governed. In *Two Treatises of Government*, he states that people are born with certain natural rights. These include rights to life, liberty, and property. The purpose of a government is to protect these rights. If the government fails to do so, the people would be justified in rebelling.

Locke’s concept of the responsibility of the government to protect the people’s “natural rights” greatly influenced the American colonists. Locke’s ideas gave structure to early colonial documents setting out agreements between the people and their governments. These documents included the Mayflower Compact and the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut.

As relations with Britain began to deteriorate, the American colonists felt that their “natural rights” were not being protected. As such, the colonists believed they were justified in rebelling against Britain. The American Revolution put Locke’s ideas into practice; many states’ constitutions as well as the Constitution of the United States were influenced by Locke’s ideas.



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- 1. What did Locke believe was the relationship between government and the people who formed the government?

- 2. How did the American colonists apply Locke’s ideas to their own governments?
