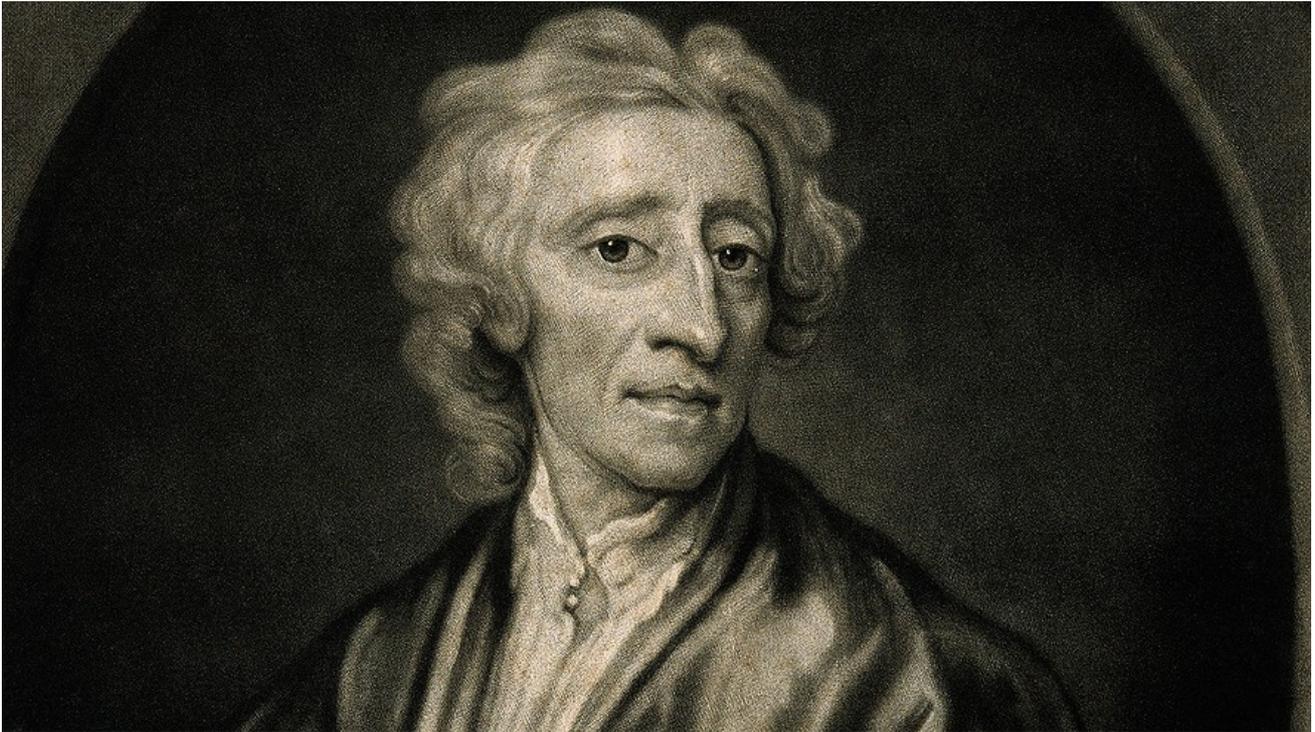


Lockean Liberalism and the American Revolution

By Isaac Kramnick, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.27.17

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English philosopher John Locke is pictured. His writings influenced the Founding Fathers of the United States. Image from Wikimedia Commons

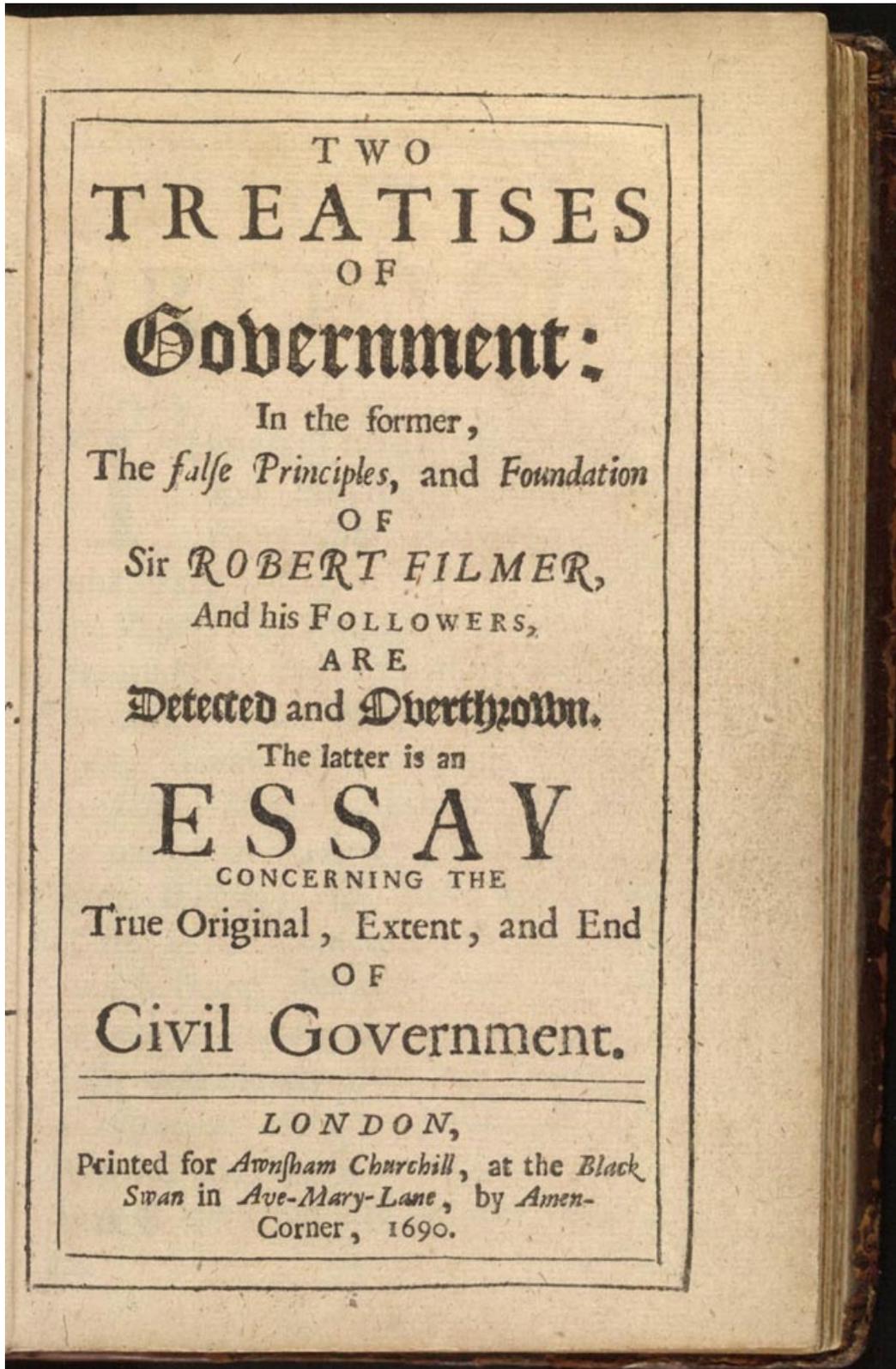
On November 20, 1772, the town of Boston took an important step toward starting the American Revolution. On that day a declaration of “the Rights of the Colonists” was adopted. Drafted by patriot Samuel Adams, the declaration summarized man’s “natural rights” as “First, a right to life; Secondly, to liberty; Thirdly, to property.”

Adams described a “natural liberty of men,” which made each man the “sole judge of his own rights.” The free man joined together to accept a “Judge between him and his neighbors.” This judge was government, which was formed to support, defend and protect man’s natural rights to “life, liberty and property.”

As Adams acknowledged, the source of these principles was the English political thinker John Locke (1632–1704).

Rulers were chosen by God

Jonathan Boucher was a British priest who had moved to the American colonies. Boucher also recognized Locke's influence, but he saw it as a bad thing. Boucher was a priest in the Anglican Church, also called the Church of England, and the king of England was also the head of the Anglican Church. Boucher criticized the movement toward revolution in the colonies. Boucher claimed the colonists had an obligation to obey and respect established governmental authority — in this case, the British government of King George III.



Governments were not established by men, Boucher insisted. Instead, they were given to men by God. Because of that, men must forever obey the rulers God has chosen to govern them.

Boucher defended the divine right of kings to govern. He attacked the claim that American colonists had a right to resist unjust authority and to govern themselves. In a 1774 sermon, Boucher singled out the source of such evil ideas: "Mr. Locke."

People started to reject standard beliefs

Boucher's ideas on government had been the standard belief in western Europe for 2,000 years. The state's purpose ("state" is another name for a government), according to the traditional Christian view, was to enforce God's moral laws, to protect God's faithful and to spread God's truth. Through the Bible, God had given humans a set of absolute and timeless principles of right and wrong. The state's mission was to see that these principles were followed. Those who ruled over the state were God's agents and had a divine right to their power.

A new view of the relation of church and state first arose in England in the 1600s and 1700s. This new view separated the idea of church and state and saw the state as purely non-religious in its origins and purpose. The American Founders accepted this new vision. They rejected both the idea of a state church and the belief that political rulers were agents of God who must be obeyed.

Locke was the English philosopher who most shaped the views of 18th-century Americans. Samuel Adams, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin and many other important figures of the revolutionary generation were all followers of his. These men were known as the Founding Fathers.



Locke argued that the state should not try to promote religion. Instead, it should have only a narrow, practical role of protecting private rights, in particular, property rights, like owning land and a home. Furthermore, if the state failed to protect the liberty or property of its subjects, then it could be dismissed and replaced. The state existed only to serve the interests and to protect the rights of its citizens.

These were precisely the beliefs held by America's Founding Fathers. The language of the Declaration of Independence strongly echoes Locke:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government."

"Laws exist to provide public peace"

The purpose of government, Locke claimed, is not to tell men what to believe or how to pray, but simply to keep the peace. It is not the state's role, Locke wrote, to establish "any articles of faith, or form of worship."

Instead, religious belief should be a private and personal matter. Every man, Locke wrote, should have "the supreme and absolute authority of judging for himself" if his own beliefs are the true and proper ones. A person's religious beliefs cannot harm anyone else and should not concern anyone else, Locke maintained.

If the state should get involved with religious beliefs, then neither should a country's laws. The purpose of the law is not to enforce religious belief, which should be a matter of opinion. Rather, laws exist to provide public peace and order and to protect "every particular man's goods and person."

Locke's beliefs live on

Locke's vision had a tremendous influence on the Founding Fathers. His ideas were clearly reflected in the Declaration of Independence. They underly such key American principles as the separation of church and state, freedom of religion and the right of citizens to choose their own government.

Isaac Kramnick is a professor at Cornell University. He is the author of several books, including "Bolingbroke and His Circle: the Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole" (1992) and "The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative" (1977), as well as numerous articles on 18th-century topics.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the section "Rulers were chosen by God" BEST explains why Jonathan Boucher was against a revolution?
- (A) Jonathan Boucher was a British priest who had moved to the American colonies.
 - (B) Boucher also recognized Locke's influence, but he saw it as a bad thing.
 - (C) Because of that, men must forever obey the rulers God has chosen to govern them.
 - (D) In a 1774 sermon, Boucher singled out the source of such evil ideas: "Mr. Locke."
- 2 Which section of the article BEST highlights John Locke's idea that people should not be forced to have a certain religious belief?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
 - (B) "People started to reject standard beliefs"
 - (C) "Laws exist to provide public peace"
 - (D) "Locke's beliefs live on"
- 3 John Locke would MOST likely agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) Protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens is the government's only job.
 - (B) Rulers should always be obeyed because they were put in power by God.
 - (C) The colonies should fight a war against England in order to become free.
 - (D) People do not have the right to decide if the government is doing a good job or not.
- 4 Which of the following answer choices BEST describes the way John Locke influenced the Founding Fathers?
- (A) He taught them to write the Declaration of Independence.
 - (B) He encouraged them to have their own religious beliefs.
 - (C) He inspired them to fight a war against England.
 - (D) He shaped their ideas about the role of government.

Answer Key

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