Lockean Liberalism and the American Revolution

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

The American Revolution was a battle for independence from British rule. It led to the forming of the United States. Fighting between the colonists and the British broke out in 1775. However, some important steps toward revolution were taken long before then.

One important step was taken in Boston on November 20, 1772. On that day, some colonists voted for a declaration of “the Rights of the Colonists.” The declaration was written by Samuel Adams.

All men are born free and equal, Adams declared. Each is the “sole judge of his own rights.” Before there was a government, Adams said, people lived without rules or rulers. They were naturally free. At some point, people came together to form a government. The purpose of this government was to protect man’s natural rights to “life, liberty and property.”

Adams did not dream up these ideas. They came from the important English thinker John Locke, who lived from 1632 to 1704.
Rulers had a God-given right to power

Jonathan Boucher was a British priest who moved to the American colonies. He knew Locke's ideas were shaping the way many colonists thought. But he saw this as a bad thing. Boucher was a colonist himself, but he was strongly against the idea of revolution. He was one of the leaders of those who wanted to remain under British rule.
Governments were not established by men, Boucher said. Instead, they were given to men by God. Men had to obey the rulers God has chosen to rule them, like kings and queens, said Boucher. For the colonists, that meant they had to honor and obey Britain's King George III.
Boucher’s ideas on government were common in his time. According to the traditional Christian view, the government’s purpose was to make sure that God’s laws were followed and to spread God’s truth.

The traditional view was that God had given humans a set of principles of right and wrong, which were described in the Bible. The government’s mission was to see that these principles were followed. Those who ruled over the government were God’s agents and had a God-given right to their power.

**Locke’s famous followers**

For nearly 2,000 years, almost everyone accepted these ideas.

Then, in the 1600s and 1700s in England, people started to think a bit differently. Some people said the church and state ("state" is another name for a government) should be separate. They said the government should get involved in religion. The American Founders accepted this new vision. They did not believe a country’s rulers were agents of God who must be obeyed no matter what.

Locke shaped the views of Americans in the 1700s more than any other English thinker. Samuel Adams, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and Benjamin Franklin were all followers of his. These were the men who led the revolution and formed the new United States. They were the Founding Fathers.
Religion should be personal

Locke argued that the government should not concern itself with religion. Its only purpose should be to protect the rights of citizens.

If a government failed to protect the liberty and rights of its subjects, then it could be overthrown and replaced, Locke said. The government existed only to serve and protect its citizens.

The purpose of government is not to tell men what to believe or how to pray, Locke claimed. It is simply to keep the peace.

What a person believes should be up to that person alone, Locke said. They should be allowed to worship 100 gods, or no god at all, he said. A person's religious beliefs cannot harm anyone else, Locke said. They should not concern anyone else either.

As seen in the Declaration of Independence

Locke strongly shaped the thinking of the Founding Fathers. His ideas are seen in the Declaration of Independence. They are behind such key American principles as the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion.

Locke boldly declared the right of citizens to choose their own government. His books helped bring about the American Revolution. His ideas still shape the United States today.

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Quiz

1 Which sentence in the section "Rulers had a God-given right to power" explains what John Boucher thought the government's main job was?

(A) Men had to obey the rulers God has chosen to rule them, like kings and queens, said Boucher.

(B) According to the traditional Christian view, the government's purpose was to make sure that God's laws were followed and to spread God's truth.

(C) The traditional view was that God had given humans a set of principles of right and wrong, which were described in the Bible.

(D) Those who ruled over the government were God's agents and had a God-given right to their power.

2 Based on information in the article, which of these statements is TRUE?

(A) John Locke believed the government and church should be separate.

(B) Johnathan Boucher was a supporter of the American revolution.

(C) John Locke did not support people's right to choose their religion.

(D) The Founding Fathers believed that rulers were the agents of God.

3 What is MOST likely the reason why the author included information about Jonathan Boucher's ideas on the role of government?

(A) to explain that anyone who was religious would probably support Britain and the rule of King George III

(B) to include the opinion of the one person living in the colonies who disagreed with the Founding Fathers

(C) to show that there were some in the colonies against the ideas of John Locke and the Founding Fathers

(D) to prove that John Locke and the Founding Fathers were not really interested in religion or what the Bible said

4 Fill in the blank.

John Locke's ideas MAINLY affected the Founding Fathers by _________.

(A) convincing them that King George III should be overthrown and replaced

(B) convincing them that King George III was not chosen to rule by God

(C) teaching them that America would be better off as its own country

(D) teaching them that the government should protect people's rights
Answer Key

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