

A History of Christianity in America

Part I: The Evolution of English Constitutional Government

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Why begin a study of Christianity in America with an brief overview of English political and religious history? That's a good question, for which there are three good reasons.

The British/American Connection

First, we cannot learn history in isolation. All of history is interconnected, and all of history has a wider context. In the case of colonial America, what happened in Britain directly affected America's historical evolution. In fact, it's impossible to make sense of early American history without a knowledge of what was going on in Britain since the thirteen colonies were originally founded as outposts of British civilization. The entire cultural *zeitgeist* of colonial America was derivative of the politics, the social attitudes, and the moral and ethical values in English society in the 17th and 18th centuries.

There is a corollary to this premise, which is that when we study a segment of history outside its wider context, we risk getting a skewed view of it. This is why a comprehensive systematic study of history is so advantageous: it helps us connect the dots in our knowledge by building a network of links and cause-and-effect relationships that both broaden and deepen our understanding. History is exceedingly complex, which is one reason why it's so fascinating.

This is also why a general study of history should always take precedence over biography. Biography can be an effective supplement to history, and it certainly is helpful in terms of personalizing history, but on the other hand it can distort our perception of the past by exaggerating the importance of one individual. In other words, in biography everything tends to swirl around one person – he or she becomes the central focus for all that is happening – which can limit our understanding of the myriad other factors

involved in any historical period or any particular issue or event.

Second, we cannot understand religious history without a broader knowledge of the social, economic and political milieu of the times. Religion is often a *contributing* factor to a particular historical development, or it may even be the *major contributing* factor, but it is never the *sole* factor. All religious movements and all religious leaders are *influenced* by their times to some extent or another. (Even Jesus adapted his message and ministry so as to make it relevant to 1st century Jewish culture.) In fact, any significant religious leader, movement or event must be relevant to some extent or another to its times. So as in the case of biography, a study of Christianity in America cannot be isolated from the major people, issues and events in American history in general.

Third, as mentioned above, American civilization was essentially transplanted English civilization (or more generically, British civilization) – with some modifications. England was America's "Mother Country," and English culture directly influenced American culture. Not only our language, but our social and political values and institutions were derived mostly from England. In terms of its political evolution, England was the most enlightened and progressive nation in the world, and America was influenced accordingly.

In addition, 17th century England was the most religiously diverse nation in the world with a chaotic assortment of major and minor denominations and sects including Catholics,

mainline Protestants (Anglicans and Presbyterians), Free Church Separatists and Baptists, and other nonconformist groups such as Quakers. All these groups were also part of the colonial American melting pot, along with others such as Lutherans, Moravians, Anabaptists (Mennonites and Amish), Shakers, and by the time of the American Revolution, Methodists. Whereas 17th century England had been the most religiously diverse nation in the world, 18th century America was even more so.

Origins of English Constitutionalism

The underlying premise behind the development of English constitutional government was that governmental powers are not absolute. The corollary is that human beings are endowed with certain God-given inalienable rights that legitimate governments recognize and respect. Constitutional government seeks to limit the political power through legal means by way of a constitution – either a written document or an oral tradition. Constitutional government also seeks to balance governmental authority and individual rights.

Historically, there have been two forms of constitutional government: constitutional monarchy and a constitutional republic. Under a **constitutional monarchy** a king (or queen) serves as the nation's head of state and shares political power with (theoretically) the electorate and (practically) a legislative body. In a **constitutional republic**, political power resides (theoretically) in the electorate and (practically) in its elected representatives, including not only legislators but the chief executive as well.

The foundation of the English legal system was laid at the outset of the 12th century with the accession of **King Henry I** (r. 1100-35) to the throne. Henry's predecessor, **William II Rufus** (r. 1087-1100), had been a ruthless and corrupt tyrant whose reign was marked by constant conflict with Church officials and the powerful English barons. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, William Rufus was "hateful to almost all his people and odious to God." With William's death his younger brother Henry claimed the throne, but his legal status was questionable. Therefore, to secure the support of England's leading clerics and nobles, Henry was compelled to issue a coronation declaration, the **Charter of Liberties**, guaranteeing the autonomy of the Church, the property and inheritance rights

of earls and barons, and impartial justice in the courts. Although intended to address only current conditions, the document later served as a kind of legal precedent in which the king acknowledged reasonable legal limits to his authority. Ironically, King Henry was in many ways a typical medieval tyrant, but following his reign he was regarded by many Englishmen as the "Lion of Justice."

Half a century later **King Henry II** (r. 1154-89), a grandson of Henry I, took the next steps in evolution of English constitutional government with the establishment of **royal magistrate courts, grand jury investigations and jury trials**. Henry's motives were not particularly altruistic, and his intention was simply to expand his own authority at the expense of his two main rivals for power: the Church and the nobility. Prior to this, local courts, usually controlled by local nobles and clerics, adjudicated most criminal and civil cases, which meant that the rich and powerful often escaped punishment for their crimes. In Henry's system a grand jury of "twelve lawful men" reviewed a case and, if the evidence seemed to warrant it, referred the matter on to a royal court presided over by a judge and a jury of one's peers. Unless the king had a special interest in the case and subverted the process, the operating principle was, "Let justice prevail."

In 1215 **King John** (r. 1199-1216) signed the **Magna Carta**, which is generally regarded as the cornerstone of English constitutional government. Like William Rufus, John was a despicable despot who regularly violated the rights of his citizens. But unfortunately for him, he lacked the forceful personality and the necessary political skills to subjugate England's powerful barons. Among his many failings, he was an inept military commander (his critics dubbed him "John Softsword"), and following a particularly disastrous campaign in France he returned to face a rebellion among the barons. Under duress he signed the Articles of the Barons, later known as the Magna Carta (or Great Charter). Inspired by the Charter of Liberties, the Magna Carta guaranteed all English citizens **equal justice** in the courts and **due process of law**. According to Chapter 39 of the document...

No free man shall be arrested, or imprisoned, or deprived of his property, or outlawed, or exiled, or in any way [harassed] ... unless by legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.

Furthermore, the charter prohibited the king from levying taxes without the consent of the **Great Council**, comprised of 25 representatives of the upper nobility and higher clergy who were empowered to overrule the will of the king if he defied the charter's provisions, even to the point of seizing his castles and possessions if necessary. Although the Magna Carta originally protected only the nobility against royal tyranny, over time many of its provisions were extended to commoners as well. Most significantly, it established the principle that royal power was limited rather than absolute, and that even the king was subject to the rule of law. As Henry Bracton, the most influential jurist of the 13th century, framed the issue:

Whatever is justly defined and approved by the counsel and consent of the magnates [i.e., the powerful and influential nobles, clerics and judicial scholars] and the common agreement of the realm [not public opinion in general but the collective approval of those in positions of authority], with the authority of the prince or king preceding – that has the force of law.

As Bracton conceptualized the law, “Whatever the king wills has the force of law,” yet “The king is under the law.” In other words, the king's will made law, but not the king's will alone. Furthermore, once established, such laws should not be changed except by the common consent of those in positions of authority who had sanctioned them.

Characteristically, King John disavowed the Magna Carta as soon as the barons left London, which precipitated a rebellion. However, England was spared a protracted and devastating war when John died the following year and an amended charter was confirmed by his successor, **Henry III** (r. 1216-72).

Historically, the significance of the Magna Carta can scarcely be exaggerated. It has been hailed by many as a landmark in the development of constitutional government, and in American history it was the foundation for many early colonial and revolutionary-era documents – everything from the Virginia Charter of 1606 (that established Jamestown colony) and the original charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Lord Alfred Thompson Denning, a prominent 20th century English jurist, praised it as “the greatest

constitutional document of all times” and “the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot.”

By the late 1200s English judges were basing their decisions on similar cases previously decided – the principle of **judicial precedent**. Over time this legal tradition constituted the body of English “**common law**” – i.e., civil and criminal laws that (at least theoretically) applied equally to all persons regardless of social rank and political connections. Although the process of jurisprudential evolution took centuries, the principles of judicial precedent and common law were essential because so many judges were incompetent political appointees.

In 1295 **King Edward I** (r. 1272-1307), strapped for money, granted membership in the Great Council for the first time to wealthy and influential commoners. He appointed two **knights** from every county and two **burghers** from every town and city, after which he insisted that they vote him new taxes. Predictably, England's nobles resented the inclusion of commoners in the Great Council, and eventually the structure of **Parliament** was developed that included a bicameral legislature. The **House of Lords**, composed of the nobility and higher clergy, constituted the Upper House, while the **House of Commons**, or Lower House, included the **gentry** class (prominent landowning aristocrats) and **burgesses** (wealthy and influential merchants and professionals.)

Now a prestigious and influential institution in its own right, Parliament slowly accrued more authority over England's political affairs. In the 14th century Parliament threatened to withhold taxes from the king unless he recognized its authority as the representative of the people to make laws. The king could lobby for new laws, but he could not unilaterally proclaim new laws without the consent of both houses of Parliament – a significant step toward the evolution of English constitutional government.

In the 1500s a series of strong European monarchs in France and the Holy Roman Empire consolidated their power and asserted the principle of **royal absolutism** (sometimes called the “**divine right of kings**”). By contrast, the Tudor monarchs who ruled in England were obliged to share power and govern by consent with Parliament, which continued to claim the right to make laws and levy taxes. It was a tense and often contentious relationship. **Henry VIII**

(r. 1497-1547) was not only a royal absolutist but a royal brute, and throughout his reign he dominated Parliament through a shrewd mix of patronage, bribery, intimidation, and outright coercion. (Henry's reign was one of the most tyrannical in English history. During his forty years on the throne he ordered the executions of an estimated 70,000 people – including two of his six wives – for a variety of criminal and political offenses.) Henry's most successful successor, **Elizabeth** (r. 1558-1603), carried on the royal tradition through less violent but nonetheless effective means by a combination of charm, flattery, patronage, bribery, and when all else failed, intimidation and the threat of persecution. Most English politicians were easily bought off or capitulated under pressure, and Parliament, often little more than an advisory council and a rubber stamp, usually provided legal sanction for Henry and Elizabeth's policies. For the most part it was summoned only when the monarch needed additional tax revenue, but nonetheless, at least in the case of Henry VIII, Parliament managed to hold some of his worst impulses in check, and least theoretically England was building a governing tradition of shared power unlike any other nation in the world.

The Turbulent 17th Century

The 17th century was one of the most fateful in English history. For most of the century a dynasty of four Stuart monarchs ruled over England – James I (r. 1603-25), Charles I (r. 1625-49), Charles II (r. 1660-85) and James II (r. 1685-88) – and in the middle of the century a bloody and protracted Civil War (1642-53) erupted that was one of the most catastrophic events in all of English history. In the midst of the Civil War English armies also launched devastating campaigns to suppress rebellions in Ireland and Scotland, and for eighteen years (1642-60) the nation was governed first by Parliament and then by an autocrat, Oliver Cromwell, until the monarchy was restored under Charles II.

In addition, this was the century in which twelve of the thirteen English colonies in North America were founded (the last one, Georgia, was established later in 1733). Hundreds of thousands of England's most industrious and productive citizens, motivated by a variety of factors, left the Mother Country for the colonies. Furthermore, regarding the evolution of English constitutional government, the 17th century was

decisive in terms of ending, once and for all, the traditional concept of royal absolutism.

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 with no heir, Parliament imported James VI from Scotland and crowned him **King James I** of England (r. 1603-25). James was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots and a distant cousin of Elizabeth, and he would become the first in a dynasty of four Stuart monarchs who would rule England for most of the 17th century.

In terms of character, James quickly gained a reputation as arrogant, tactless, disreputable and vulgar. Lacking common sense, he surrounded himself with officials and advisors who were sycophants, rogues and fools. Although well-educated, he was ignorant and insensitive toward English laws and traditions, and like all monarchs of his day, he was an ardent believer in the "divine right of kings." According to James, kings were "little gods on earth" who received their authority directly from God himself, and to oppose the king was tantamount to rebellion against God. As he put it, "The king comes from God, and law comes from the king."

Of course, many in Parliament felt otherwise. After all, they had *hired* James, and they hoped to see Parliamentary government strengthened now that the indigenously-English Tudor dynasty had run its course. Unlike the Scottish legislature, many Members of Parliament (MPs) were successful merchants and influential aristocrats in their own right who sought political power commensurate with their economic clout. James, however, considered Parliament to be little more than a nuisance, and he resented having to share power with inferior nobles and even commoners. So throughout most of his reign the King and Parliament haggled constantly over everything from taxes and the national budget to foreign policy and even religious issues, and on several occasions James dismissed Parliament for extended periods of time.

In the mid-1580s under Queen Elizabeth an English mercantile company had planted a colony in America at **Roanoke Island**, but the ill-fated colony was doomed from the outset. Mismanaged, ill-equipped, surrounded by hostile natives, and deprived of provisions in its first three years due to the Spanish Armada threat to England, Roanoke Colony vanished without a trace by the time its sponsors managed to get supply ships to the colony in the summer of 1588. Nonetheless, the vision for colonization

continued unabated until the Virginia Company, with the tacit approval of King James, founded **Jamestown Colony** in 1607, the first permanent English settlement in America. Jamestown was strictly an economic enterprise, and it was governed by an official appointed by Parliament. Most of the colonists were, of course, conventional English Anglicans, but religion was not a factor in its establishment.

Many historians are convinced that King James I was a closet Catholic, and that he secretly hoped to restore papal authority over England as well as his homeland of Scotland. Regardless, he had little appreciation for zealous Protestant reformers, which meant that he particularly detested the **Puritans** in Parliament. Puritans were an influential and outspoken minority, and they strenuously objected to royal absolutism, the King's lack of spirituality, and his worldly and luxurious lifestyle. James was determined to control the Anglican churches and clergy within his realm, and he opposed the Puritans' independent nature as well as their congregational approach to church government. Therefore, he sided with the old guard Anglican establishment in its power struggle with the Puritans for control of the Church's theology and ecclesiology .

James detested the Puritans, but he never managed to totally subjugate them due to the fact that there were tens of thousands of them, many of whom were socially and politically prominent and influential. But other nonconformist groups were more easily targeted for harassment and persecution, including a small group of radical Christians who were known as **Separatists**. Unlike the Puritans who worked within the Church of England to reform (or "purify") it, the Separatists believed that the Anglican Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, was hopelessly corrupt. Therefore, in their mind true Christians who were devoted to the principles of the New Testament should separate from this worldly institution and form independent congregations of their own. In contrast to the Puritans, Separatists were not numerous (there were probably no more than a few thousand in all of England at the time), they were not socially or politically prominent, and therefore they were vulnerable to harassment and persecution from governmental and Anglican officials.

In 1607 some of these Separatists fled England and lived in exile as "**pilgrims**" in Holland before returning twelve years later. Desperately seeking

religious freedom and having few options, a small party of Separatists set out for America in the fall of 1620 and established the **Plymouth Colony** just north of Cape Code. So unlike Jamestown, in which religion was virtually a non-factor, Plymouth was founded as a haven for devout, persecuted Christian dissidents.

Although James was a very tepid Christian at best, his reign was noteworthy in Christian history in one respect: he commissioned the Anglican clergy to produce a new official "Authorized Version" of the Bible in 1611. The result was the **King James Bible**, a literary masterpiece that remained the standard English translation among most Protestants for 350 years.

James' last years were unproductive. Increasingly senile, his power struggles with Parliament intensified, and he lost the good will and support of most of his subjects. With his passing he was succeeded by his second son, **Charles I** (r. 1625-49), who immediately announced his intention to continue his father's policies. Like his father, Charles was an ardent believer in the "divine right of kings," and similarly he surrounded himself with incompetent and worthless advisors. Virtually no one had high expectations for Charles. From early childhood he had exhibited serious character flaws, and those who knew him conceded that he was vain, selfish, intemperate, unreliable, and a chronic liar with few scruples.

Also like his father, Charles was sympathetic to Catholicism, and he even married a French Catholic princess, Henrietta-Marie de Bourbon. Even more hostile toward the Puritans and other nonconformists than his father, he used his sycophantic **Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud**, to do his dirty work. With the full support of Laud and the Anglican hierarchy, Charles vowed, "I will make them conform themselves, or else I will harrie them out of the land, or do worse." The result was that beginning in 1629 and continuing throughout his reign, tens of thousands of Puritans – some of the most conscientious, productive, and solid citizens in English society – emigrated to **Massachusetts Bay Colony** in America.

Under Charles I relations between the King and Parliament quickly deteriorated. In 1628 he needed funds for foreign involvements, and Parliament, after contentious negotiations, finally granted the money in return for his support of the **Petition of Right**. The Petition prohibited the

quartering of soldiers in private homes and the declaration of martial law in peacetime, and guaranteed English citizens protection against arbitrary imprisonment. This was a major concession on Charles' part, and over the next dozen years the notoriously hot-tempered monarch dismissed Parliament on several occasions. In fact for eleven years (1629-40) the King governed entirely without Parliament.

In 1637 a revolt broke out in Scotland over religious issues. King Charles was determined to unite Britain and Scotland under one Church, and when the ever-compliant Archbishop Laud attempted to impose a new prayer book on the Scots Presbyterians modeled on the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, a major crisis ensued. To force compliance, Charles, who imagined himself to be a gifted military commander, led a small army into Scotland, whereupon he was promptly defeated. Returning to London, he convened Parliament and requested funds to quell the revolt.

Parliament, which had sat empty for nearly a decade, refused the King's petition unless he agreed to substantial political reforms. Characteristically, the imperious Charles was outraged, even to the point of ordering the ears of three of his most vocal opponents to be cut off. Once again, he dismissed Parliament and attacked Scotland only to suffer another defeat. In retaliation, the Scots invaded northern England and occupied much of the country.

In November 1640, desperate for more money and troops, Charles once again convened Parliament (known in history as the "Long Parliament"), but this assembly of legislators opposed to the King and his policies even more than the previous one. Immediately, MPs began proposing various grievances and reforms, and over the next several months they passed a series of new laws that severely limited the King's powers, including...

- Parliament was authorized to convene at least once every three years whether or not the King summoned it;
- The King could no longer dissolve Parliament without its consent;
- The King could not impose taxes without Parliament's consent; and
- The King's ministers were answerable to Parliament.

In reaction, Charles recruited a mercenary army from among the ranks of his loyal supporters including many nobles, knights (dubbed "**cavaliers**"), and rural gentry. As tensions mounted, in early 1641 Parliament arrested one of the King's most powerful and corrupt advisors, **Thomas Wentworth**, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, on charges of treason. Later in the year a warrant was also issued for the arrest of Archbishop William Laud, and after his imprisonment in the Tower of London for several months he was convicted of treason and beheaded in January 1642. Shortly thereafter Wentworth, who had been held in the Tower for more than a year, was also tried and sentenced to death. A few months after that, Irish revolutionaries exploited the turbulence in England by igniting a revolt of their own.

The English Civil War (1642-53)

For nearly ten years England was wracked by internal strife and external conflicts with Ireland and Scotland. Within England itself, the Civil War was a decade-long series of armed conflicts mostly between the Royalist supporters of King Charles I and Parliament.

In January 1642 the King, accompanied by 400 soldiers, attempted to arrest five MPs on charges of treason. His efforts failed, and the House of Commons responded by voting to raise an army in defense. Fearing that he would be deposed, Charles fled to Oxford and called upon his loyal subjects to defend him. All over England various cities and towns sided either with the King or Parliament – or else attempted (usually unsuccessfully) to remain neutral.

Despite the efforts of modern Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill to cast the English Civil War as a class conflict, the facts argue otherwise. According to Hill, the war was a bourgeois revolution in opposition to royal absolutism, the conservative rural gentry class, and "the reactionary forces of the established Church [of England]." On the other side was an alliance of merchants, industrialists, yeoman farmers, the "progressive gentry," and those enlightened citizens who understood "what the struggle was really about."

Like most Marxist interpretations of history, there is some truth in this assessment, but overall it is amiss. Marxist historiography, based on the principle of dialectical materialism and the inevitability of class struggle, is too simplistic. In

reality, any major historical event is far too broad and complex to be forced into a Marxist matrix. In the case of the English Civil War, the conflict was primarily a contest between opposing political ideologies, and the fundamental issue was **royal absolutism** versus **constitutional government**. But of course this is not to deny that religion and class issues were also significant contributing factors.

The first phase of the war pitted Royalists (or “**Cavaliers**”) against Parliamentarians (called “**Roundheads**” because they shaved their hair in contrast to the long-haired, “worldly” cavaliers). In this conflict, the King found support primarily among the higher nobility, the aristocracy, High Anglicans and Catholics, and among a significant portion of the rural peasantry. Parliament’s forces drew support among those who supported the ideals of constitutional government, and included many among the burgess and gentry classes of society. The Roundheads were also bolstered by Puritans and other religious dissenters. In general, most of the major cities sided with Parliament, as did the English navy, which for most of the war cut off the King’s forces from their allies on the Continent.

The first major pitched battle of the war was fought at Edgehill in October 1642, and over the next several months Royalists won most of the early engagements but were unable to win a decisive victory. Both sides desperately sought allies. Charles offered concessions to the Irish to end their rebellion, while Parliament negotiated an alliance with Scottish Presbyterian “**Covenanters**.”

In the first year of the war **Oliver Cromwell** (1599-1658) emerged as the most brilliant military tactician on either side. Cromwell was born into the lesser gentry and educated at Sussex College of Cambridge University. Elected to Parliament in 1628, he quickly distinguished himself as a champion of the poor and dispossessed. During his tenure in the legislature he became a Christian and aligned himself with the Puritan faction, and some biographers contend that he even considered joining the mass migration of Puritans to New England. As an MP he was committed to limiting the power of the King and the Anglican Church, and when war broke out in 1642 he organized a crack cavalry regiment of “godly, honest men.” A naturally gifted military leader, he soon became a commander in the Parliamentarian army.

In 1645 Parliament reorganized its forces into the “**New Model Army**” under the command of Cromwell and **Sir Thomas Fairfax**. The army was well-armed and disciplined, and many of the soldiers regarded the war as a Christian crusade. (The troops often sang hymns as they marched into battle). Going up against a more experienced army led by professional officers, Cromwell’s forces won every major engagement, and with each military victory he became more convinced that he was God’s instrument to bring about a new political and social order in England.

In two decisive engagements – the Battle of Naseby in June 1645 and the Battle of Langport the following month, the New Model Army devastated the Royalist forces. Following these victories, the Parliamentarians assumed that King Charles I would negotiate a settlement that would establish a constitutional monarchy. Instead, the King took refuge with a Scottish Presbyterian army and sought to resume the war. However, the Scots handed Charles over to Parliament in May 1646, and he was promptly imprisoned. Unrepentant, he continued conspiring with various groups to regain the throne.

With the King’s capture, the war entered a second phase when the Presbyterian-controlled Parliament passed new laws that discriminated against religious Independents such as Cromwell and other minorities, including the congregational Puritans. As a result, a second brief civil war erupted. Over the next two years a curious mix of Presbyterians, Royalists, Scots, and Welsh rebels allied against the Independents and Puritans, but once again Cromwell’s forces prevailed, winning decisively at the Battle of Preston in August 1648.

While Cromwell’s forces fought on the battlefield, Parliament debated what to do with the King. Some, including a faction of “moderate” MPs, considered restoring Charles I to the throne in return for certain concessions. In December 1648 a military detachment under the command of **Thomas Pride** marched on Parliament and ousted the moderates. “Pride’s Purge” resulted in the arrest of 45 MPs, barred 146 others from the chambers, and set up a “**Rump Parliament**” with the remaining 75 members. The army then ordered Parliament to convene a High Court of Justice to try the King for treason. The trial began in January 1649, and the Court found Charles guilty as a “tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy,” and sentenced him to death.

Cromwell hesitated to sign the execution order but relented. Given that the King had been a tyrant and “a man of blood” who had violated the civil liberties of English citizens, he reluctantly conceded that the King’s execution was “a cruel necessity.” Charles was decapitated a few days later, and by all reports accepted his fate with grace and dignity. However, still incapable of honesty, he continued to assert his innocence to the end and proclaimed that he was dying for the principle of “liberty under the law.”

Ironically, public opinion turned against Cromwell and the Puritans for the execution of Charles I. Forgetting his oppressive reign, many Englishmen actually sympathized with him. Therefore, in executing the King, the Puritans managed to transform a tyrant into a martyr.

In the midst of all this turmoil Irish revolutionaries fomented a rebellion to overthrow English rule. Early in the Civil War they had allied with King Charles and the Royalists in return for concessions, and in 1641 Irish Catholics slaughtered an estimated 40-50,000 English Protestants in Ulster in northern Ireland. For several years their drive for independence seemed to succeed until August of 1649 when Cromwell landed with a large invasion force and began a systematic campaign to crush the rebellion. It was a bloody and brutal campaign as Cromwell’s troops were bent on revenge for the slaughter of the Ulster Protestants eight year earlier.

Following a prolonged siege of Drogheda, Cromwell ordered the execution of all the survivors who were capable of bearing arms. Charging that the Irish resistors were “barbarous wretches,” Cromwell claimed that their execution was “a righteous judgment of God” that would “prevent the effusion of blood for the future.” Nearly 3,500 people were killed, including 2,700 captured soldiers, 700 civilians, and a few Catholic priests whom Cromwell claimed were bearing arms. Later, hundreds more Irish resistors were massacred at Wexford.

Cromwell’s subjugation of the Irish rebellion resulted in some of the bloodiest massacres in the whole turbulent history of Anglo-Irish relations. Over a four-year span hundreds of thousands of Irish died as a result of the insurrection, starvation and disease. Furthermore, when the war finally subsided Parliament confiscated much of the Catholic-owned land in northern Ireland and distributed it among Cromwell’s soldiers and other English immigrants. Even to this day the

Irish regard Oliver Cromwell as one of the great villains in history.

As Cromwell’s forces were suppressing the Irish Rebellion, a similar insurrection broke out in Scotland. Presbyterian “Covenanters” had opposed the execution of Charles I for fear that Parliament would rescind Scottish independence and try to absorb the country into a new English Commonwealth. So in a bizarre turn of events, Scottish authorities offered the crown of Scotland to **Prince Charles**, the oldest son of Charles I who was in exile in France. Prince Charles landed in Scotland in June 1650 and took command of a combined force of Covenanters and Royalists. Within a month Cromwell arrived from Ireland and besieged Edinburgh, and by the end of the year much of southern Scotland was under his control. However, it took more than another year before Parliamentary forces under **General George Monck** finally pacified all of Scotland. Meanwhile, Prince Charles and his Scottish allies retaliated by invading northern England, where they were finally defeated by Cromwell at the Battle of Worcester in September 1651. After the battle Charles managed to evade capture, and he returned to France. At this point it appeared that his fledgling political career was over.

In 1652 a “**Tender of Union**” agreement was negotiated that ended the Scottish Rebellion. The Scots were granted thirty seats in a united Parliament in London, and Monck was appointed military governor of Scotland.

Casualties during the decade-long English Civil War were catastrophic. As in most wars, disease caused more deaths than combat, but in England an estimated 190,000 people died – 85,000 in battle and another hundred thousand or so of disease. This amounted to 3.7% of the total population. (By comparison, in the American Civil War less than 2% of the population died – by far the highest casualty rate of any war in U.S. history.) Proportionately, the death rate in the Scottish Rebellion was even worse. An estimated 60,000 Scots died – about 6% of the population – including some 10,000 who died as POWs or were deported to New England or the West Indies to work as indentured servants. But the hardest hit was Ireland, where over 600,000 died including half-a-million Catholics and more than a hundred thousand Protestants. In addition, about 40,000 Irish Catholics were driven into exile and others were sold as indentured servants to New England and the West Indies. Percentage-

wise, about 30% of the entire Irish population was either killed or exiled as a result of the conflict.

The Interregnum (1649-60)

From 1649-60 the Puritan-controlled **Commonwealth of England** passed from one experimental government to another. Throughout much of the period Cromwell ruled as a virtual dictator. As “Lord Protector,” Cromwell sought to govern wisely and justly, and in the first few years he called a number of Parliaments, only to dismiss each one for lack of harmony and efficiency. Although a believer in Parliamentary government, he finally concluded that only a benevolent dictator could save England from chaos and further civil strife. As one biographer has noted, “For the rest of his life, [Cromwell] trusted fewer and fewer men to share the nation’s leadership. Eventually he trusted only himself.” [Collin Hansen, “The Puritan Moses.” *Christian History & Biography*, Vol. 89 (Winter 2006), p. 25.] So for most of the Interregnum England was divided into military districts and governed by generals who reported directly to the Lord Protector himself.

Most historians tend to regard Cromwell as a gifted military genius but an intolerant, self-righteous and deluded religious fanatic who attempted to impose a Puritan dictatorship on England. Undoubtedly, there is some truth in this assessment, but on the other hand few leaders in world history have exercised so much power and abused it so little as Oliver Cromwell. When Parliament offered him the crown, he adamantly refused it and resisted the temptation to establish his family as a new line of hereditary monarchs. Likewise, in contrast to virtually all the great monarchs and dictators in world history (and not a few American presidents), he resisted the temptation to use his position to enrich himself and his family.

Also overlooked is the fact that Cromwell actually expanded the parameters of religious toleration by ending the persecution of Quakers and offering sanctuary to persecuted European Jews. According to the Puritan minister **Richard Baxter**, there was never a time when the word of God brought so many people to faith as during the Cromwellian period, and in fact he was magnanimous in his treatment of all sects other than his most ardent opponents, the Catholics and High-Church Anglicans. For all his apparent faults, in the decade in which he held power

Cromwell never wavered in his conviction that he was a mere instrument of righteousness in God’s hands.

Although Cromwell ruled with relative effectiveness, his policies and programs became increasingly unpopular with the masses. Strict laws forbade public profanity, drinking, dancing, theater-going and card-playing – as well as Catholic Holy Days such as Christmas. In the minds of many, “Merry Ol’ England” had become overly serious, sober, sanctimonious and stultifying.

Cromwell died in 1658 of malaria and a kidney infection. He was succeeded by his son, **Richard Cromwell**, who accorded his father a state funeral and burial in Westminster Abbey befitting a great king, yet there was relatively little mourning throughout the land. Lacking his father’s political skills and his fervent Puritan faith, Richard Cromwell ruled for less than a year before losing the support of key politicians and the army. Almost inconceivably, public opinion throughout England actually favored restoring the Stuart monarchy.

The Restoration (1660-85)

Early in 1660 **General George Monck**, the commander of Parliamentary forces in Scotland, marched on London, organized a *coup* that ousted Richard Cromwell, and ordered elections for a new Parliament. Acceding to popular demand, Parliament invited Prince Charles, the oldest son of Charles I, to return from exile in France and reclaim the throne as **King Charles II** (r. 1660-85). (Note: Royalists seized the opportunity to desecrate the remains of Oliver Cromwell. They exhumed his body, gave it a mock trial, and hanged it. Then they cut off its head and displayed it on a pole at Westminster Hall.)

Exiled in 1646, Charles had watched helplessly as his father was tried for treason and executed. Although a believer in the “divine right of kings,” Charles was first and foremost a pragmatist: when asked by Parliament if he could govern as a constitutional monarchy, he assured them that he could. Besides, he remarked dryly, he had no desire “to go on my travels again.”

Personality-wise, Charles was more attuned to English values than his father and grandfather. Witty, worldly and attractive, he was a man of easy morals with a shrewd political sense. Although he played the role of a Protestant and a constitutional monarch, he was in fact a closet

Catholic. Charles' model as a ruler was **Louis XIV**, the self-proclaimed "Sun King" of France whom he greatly admired. Secretly, Charles wanted to restore Catholicism in England and rule as an absolute monarch, but he was too much of a realist to openly attempt such a futile policy. But on his deathbed in 1685 he admitted to being a life-long Catholic.

On returning to England, Charles agreed to limit his royal powers and promised to summon Parliament regularly. He also agreed to levy no new taxes nor interfere in religion without Parliament's consent. At the urging of key MPs, Charles appointed five advisors (called the "Cabal") to serve as a ministerial council – a type of administrative cabinet. Parliament granted the King a regular income from customs and excise taxes, but accustomed to luxury as he was, Charles found it difficult making ends meet. Privately, he complained that he could hardly afford to keep his many mistresses living in high style. But for many years the King's austere budget limited him from making too much mischief in foreign affairs.

Despite his initial promises, Charles II plotted and schemed for twenty years to gradually accrue more power. Like his father and grandfather, he was skilled at bribery and manipulation. A Machiavellian at heart, over time he adopted two techniques to manipulate the system and public opinion. First, he used his ministers as "lightning rods" to test public reactions to various policies, and he learned to deceive and undermine his own ministers when it suited his purposes. Secondly, he became a master of "divide-and-conquer" politics, constantly played-off one political faction against another in order to leverage his power.

Under his reign, Parliament quickly overturned many of Cromwell's policies. In 1661 Parliament passed the **Corporation Act** barring all non-Anglicans from participating in government. The following year, the **Act of Uniformity** (1662) expelled some 2,000 Puritan clergymen from the Church of England. Next, the **Conventual Act** (1664) allowed the government to imprison or deport any religious dissenters who persisted in attending non-conformist churches. So in 1665 and 1666 when the **Great Plague** and the **Great Fire** ravaged London, killing thousands, Puritans declared these calamities to be divine punishment for England tolerating such an immoral and wicked king.

In 1670 Charles II stirred up considerable hostility when he tried to negotiate a secret treaty with France. In the **Treaty of Dover**, Louis XIV agreed to pay Charles £200,000 annually in return for England's support of France in its war with Holland. In addition, Charles II agreed to promote policies that granted social and economic privileges to Roman Catholics. When details of the treaty leaked out, a wave of anti-Catholic fervor swept England. Undeterred, the King issued a **Declaration of Indulgence for Dissenters and Catholics** in 1672. Under the guise of promoting full religious tolerance, the measure was a transparent attempt to aid the struggling Catholic Church in England. Public reaction was vociferous in its opposition, and fear spread of a "popish plot" to return England to Catholicism. The following year Parliament forced the King to withdraw the Declaration and passed the **Test Act**, which like the previous Corporation Act excluded all but Anglicans from civil and military office. Fearing royal tyranny, the **Whig** faction in Parliament passed the **Habeas Corpus Act** in 1679, providing legal protection against arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without due process of law.

Tired of continuous conflict with Whig politicians, Charles II dissolved Parliament in 1681. Along with his political cronies and supporters, the **Tories**, he sought to suppress free political speech and stifle self-government in the towns and villages throughout England. His efforts were largely successful, and when he died in 1685 Charles was probably as dominant as his predecessors had been.

Although he had several illegitimate children, Charles II left no legitimate heir, so the crown went to his younger brother, the Duke of York, who ruled as **James II** (r. 1685-88). James had publicly converted to Catholicism in 1670, but his older brother had nevertheless involved him in the affairs of state despite opposition from Whigs. As a result, many Whigs tried unsuccessfully to prevent him from becoming king.

James' short reign was exceedingly turbulent. He was as vain and arrogant as his predecessors, but he lacked his brother's charm, shrewdness and political savvy. From the outset he showed partiality toward Roman Catholics, and in direct violation of the Test Act he appointed Catholics to top government positions as royal advisors and administrators. Furthermore, he granted commissions to Catholics in the top ranks of the

army and navy. As a result, his pro-Catholic policies inspired much fear and hostility. In France, Louis XIV had recently revoked the **Edict of Nantes** that granted religious tolerance to Protestants (called “Huguenots”), and his officials had begun actively harassing Protestants to the point that thousands were fleeing the country.

James II clearly threatened England’s tradition of constitutional government, and it was his audacious and ill-fated attempts to usurp more power that sealed his fate. It began with his claim of authority to veto Parliamentary laws and his efforts to repeal the **Test Act** and the **Habeas Corpus Act**. Then, like his brother a few years earlier, he issued a **Declaration of Indulgence** in 1687 granting all his subjects freedom of religion – a measure that neither Anglicans nor dissenters supported since it was obviously intended to favor Roman Catholics. But the King’s most controversial act was to camp a standing army a few miles outside London in order to intimidate the Whig opposition in Parliament. The move failed, and it only emboldened those who wanted to see the King deposed.

The Glorious Revolution (1688)

In 1688 a son was born to James, which crystallized opposition to his reign. Apparently, many Englishmen were willing to endure James’ rule because he was already in his fifties and would be succeeded by his Protestant daughter, **Mary**, the queen of Holland and wife of **William of Orange**. But the birth of a son and heir meant that England would be ruled by a Catholic monarch for at least another generation – a prospect that many were unwilling to tolerate.

In response to the birth of James’ son, political leaders from both the Whig and Tory factions dispatched a secret message inviting Queen Mary of Holland to replace her father on the throne. Mary declined unless her husband be allowed to co-rule with her, and William insisted on being accorded the full honors of kingship. Leaders in Parliament accepted William and Mary’s terms, and in 1688 they landed in England with a Dutch army. James tried to rally the English army and the populace but found little support, so he was replaced with relatively little bloodshed – hence the name, “the Glorious Revolution.” The new king, William, had no desire to imprison his father-in-law, and he purposely allowed James to escape to safety in France.

England’s Constitutional Monarchy

With the Glorious Revolution and the coronation of William and Mary, England entered a new era. In the eighty-five years since James I first became king, Parliament had fought almost continuously with the monarch for dominance in the government. By 1688 Parliament had won out in its century-long power struggle, and specific steps were taken to assure that a new despot wouldn’t rule in the future.

In 1689 England’s constitutional monarchy was secured by a comprehensive **Bill of Rights** that strengthened the authority of Parliament and set definite restrictions on the monarchy. The bill defined the new relationship between the monarch and Parliament and specified certain civil liberties accorded English citizens, including the following provisions:

- The monarch is an official chosen by Parliament and subject to its laws.
- The monarch may not issue or suspend any law, levy taxes, or maintain a standing army without Parliament’s consent.
- Parliament should meet frequently and its members elected freely.
- Members of Parliament are guaranteed the right to debate and express themselves freely without harassment or threat of persecution by the monarch.
- English citizens are guaranteed “the right... to petition the king” without fear of harassment or persecution.
- Citizens charged with crimes are entitled to a trial by a jury of their peers.
- “Excessive bail and fines” are prohibited, as are “cruel and unusual punishments.”
- Freedom of the press is guaranteed.

In conjunction with the Bill of Rights, Parliament also passed a far-reaching **Act of Toleration** in 1689 that granted religious freedom to all but Catholics and Unitarians. This was a significant turning point in English history, and after 1689 the government virtually ceased harassing and persecuting religious dissidents.

Twelve years later Parliament passed the **Act of Settlement** (1701) providing for the orderly succession to the throne. Parliament reasserted its right to select the sovereign and define the conditions under which he or she ruled, and the Act required that the sovereign be a member of the Church of England.

[NOTE: In terms of the succession, there have been thirteen reigning monarchs in Great Britain in the 320 years since the Glorious Revolution:

- **William & Mary** (r. 1689-1702) had no heir, so the throne was offered to Mary's sister, Anne.
- **Queen Anne** (r. 1702-14) produced no heirs, so succession passed to her Protestant relatives, the **Hanovers** of Germany.
- **George I** (r. 1714-27) was a distant cousin of Queen Anne who spoke little English when he assumed the throne.
- **George II** (r. 1727-60), like his father, spoke little English and took little interest in political affairs.
- **George III** (r. 1760-1820) was King of England during the American Revolution.
- **George IV** (r. 1820-30).
- **Edward IV** (r. 1830-37).
- **Queen Victoria** (r. 1837-1902) was England's longest-reigning monarch and the last of the Hanoverian dynasty.
- **Edward VII** (r. 1901-10), the son of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, was the first of the **Saxe-Coburg and Gotha** dynasty.
- **George V** (r. 1910-36) changed the family name in the midst of World War I to the **House of Windsor**.
- **Edward VIII** (r. 1936) voluntarily abdicated the throne in order to marry a commoner, the American socialite Wallis Simpson.
- **George VI** (r. 1936-52).
- **Queen Elizabeth II** (1952-present).]

In 1707 Parliament passed the **Act of Union** in which England and Scotland were united into one nation, the **Kingdom of Great Britain**.

Years earlier, during the reign of Charles II, many had feared that the King was a royal absolutist whose agenda included the restoration of Catholicism as the state religion. At the time, supporters of the King in Parliament, many of whom were nobles and members of the upper class elite, came to be known as **Tories**. Those who favored a constitutional monarchy under a Protestant king, most of whom were rural gentry and urban burgesses, formed a "loyal opposition" faction called the **Whigs**. The distinction between

the two factions crystallized during the reign of James II. Whigs objected to his character, his Catholicism, his pro-French sympathies, and his absolutist tendencies. Following the Glorious Revolution the political philosopher **John Locke** articulated the Whig ideology, as did the political economist **Adam Smith** two generations later. Over time the Tory faction came to be identified with the status quo, and by the late 19th century they were known as the **Conservative Party**. The Whig faction was more democratic and reform-minded, and by the late 1800s they had morphed into the **Liberal Party**.

Traditionally, the **Cabinet** was a select group of MPs who met in private with the king to advise him on various issues. The first reference to a "Cabinet Council" appears during the reign of Charles I. Beginning with Charles II, heads of various governmental departments who were leaders in the House of Commons met separately with the king, and this group was called the "**Cabal**." Under William and Mary it became obvious that government functioned better when all ministers of the Cabinet belonged to the majority party in the House of Commons, so thereafter the sovereign selected certain Tory or Whig leaders to fill key Cabinet positions.

Being German and unable to speak English, neither George I nor George II took much active interest in governing and rarely attended Cabinet meetings. As a result, the Cabinet became the central executive committee of government. **Sir Robert Walpole** (fl. 1721-42), the most prominent Member of Parliament over a twenty-year period, chaired most Cabinet meetings and acted as the intermediary between the King and the Cabinet. In time, Walpole was acknowledged as the *prime* (or first) minister, and thereafter the king customarily appointed the leader of the majority party in Parliament to the position of **Prime Minister**. By the late 1800s the Prime Minister had become the actual head of government, and eventually he would appoint the other members of the Cabinet as well.

Summa

The evolution of England's constitutional government was a prolonged and often agonizing 800-year-long process. Much blood was shed and many heads rolled along the way. As the British historian, Lord Acton, famously noted, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and monarchs and tyrants rarely

share power voluntarily. At the outset of the 12th century English kings had – or at least asserted the right to have – absolute power. Beginning with Henry I (r. 1100-35), and for strictly political and pragmatic reasons, the English king began the tradition of sharing power – although often reluctantly and usually by necessity. By the turn of the 20th century the monarch was primarily a figure-head in English politics, and real power had passed (at least theoretically) to the people through their elected representatives in Parliament and the Prime Minister. Given mankind’s inherently selfish nature, it shouldn’t be all that surprising that it took centuries for the axis of political power to eventually shift.

Post-Script: The Emergence of Classical Liberalism

Gradually over the centuries, beginning with the controversies over royal absolutism and the “divine right of kings” that led to the formation of Parliament and the concept of shared power, a new political ideology emerged based on radical principles set forth by a new generation of political thinkers associated with the **Enlightenment**. In essence the Enlightenment was an intellectual revolution that emerged following the last of Europe’s so-called “religious wars” – the **Thirty Years War** on the Continent (1618-48) and the **English Civil War** (1642-53). Originally an elitist movement among French thinkers, or *philosophes*, the Enlightenment included philosophers, scientists, literary figures, and some theologians.

In the most general sense, *philosophes* focused on two objectives: First, to establish general truths about human nature and human social development; and second, to apply these truths in order to improve human societies. In time the Enlightenment impacted all areas of Western culture including religion, philosophy and political science, but the primary focus was on government – in particular, what is the best, most humane form of government that will maximize liberty and equal justice under the law?

The political philosophy of the Enlightenment was a fundamental challenge to **Classical Conservatism**, the traditional socio/political ideology of Western civilization that was built on three social institutions:

(1) Monarchy, often expressed in the principle of royal absolutism or “LEX/REX” – i.e., the concept that law comes from the king.

(2) An established state church. In keeping with the traditional medieval concept of **Christian sacralism** (i.e., the union of church and state), each nation incorporated an official state church financed through public funding.

(3) A hierarchical class system marked by titles and ranks of nobility and aristocracy and other gradations of social ranking based on wealth and vocation.

The working assumption of Classical Conservatism was that the traditional socio/political system was God-ordained – the corollary being that to challenge that tradition was tantamount to rebellion against the divinely-established order of the universe.

In contrast to Classical Conservatism, the political theorists of the Enlightenment put forth a radical new philosophy of political science that later came to be known as **Classical Liberalism**, incorporating the following concepts:

- Just as there are natural laws that govern the physical sciences, there are natural (moral) laws that govern the social sciences and human relations.
- These natural laws can be discovered through reason and are “self-evident” – as Thomas Jefferson noted in the Declaration of Independence.
- Nothing should be accepted solely on the basis of tradition.
- These self-evident principles should form the basis for government and other social institutions.
- If free of government interference, man will pursue his natural inclinations and create a better society.

Although Enlightenment rationalism would eventually supplant Christianity as the dominant socio/political influence in Western civilization, in the 18th century there was a general consensus that the two were not only compatible but virtually inextricable. After all, it was assumed, both were based on the principles of **Natural (moral) Law**, which was the standard for all justifiable manmade laws. As the French *philosophe*, Montesquieu, emphasized, “Men make their own laws, but these laws must conform to the eternal laws of God.” Years later, John Quincy Adams reiterated this principle:

Our political way of life is by the laws of nature, of nature’s God, and of course presupposes the existence of God, the

moral ruler of the universe, and a rule of right and wrong, of just and unjust, binding upon man, preceding all institutions of human society and government.

Other influential American political theorists such as Alexander Hamilton concurred:

Good and wise men, in all ages, have... supposed that the Deity... has constituted an eternal and immutable law, which is indispensably obligatory upon all mankind, prior to any human institution whatever.

Furthermore, as Jefferson observed, the principles of Natural Law should serve as the standard for all manmade laws even in a self-governing constitutional republic:

It is strangely absurd to suppose that a million human beings collected together are not under the same moral laws which bind each of them separately.

Classical Liberalism derived from various sources, but it was the **English Whig** tradition that best exemplified these principles and the writings of **John Locke** (1632-1704) that most comprehensively defined them. Locke was the premier political thinker of his generation, and his theories encapsulated the spirit of the Enlightenment and the Whig ideal. He also influenced and inspired subsequent socio/political theorists including Baron de Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Americans such as Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Jefferson regarded Locke as one of the “three greatest men that have ever lived,” and the basic philosophy of the Declaration of Independence directly reflects Locke’s ideals.

In addition to his writings on political philosophy, Locke was an influential voice in England’s protracted struggle over religious liberty. In his *Letters Concerning Toleration* (1689-92), Locke set forth three arguments for religious tolerance: (1) Political leaders are incapable of defining religious orthodoxy or objectively evaluating the competing truth-claims of various religious groups; (2) Even if political authorities could objectively define religious orthodoxy, enforcing a single “true religion” would be futile because religious beliefs cannot be compelled by coercion; and (3) Coercing religious uniformity is counterproductive because it leads to more social disorder than allowing religious diversity.

Most of Locke’s political philosophy was

incorporated into *Two Treatises of Government*, written several years before the Glorious Revolution of 1689 but only published in 1690 after King James II was deposed. Written in opposition to the doctrine of royal absolutism, Locke’s *First Treatise* was a point-by-point rebuttal of Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha: Or the Natural Power of Kings* (1680), in which the author had argued that civil society was founded on the divinely-sanctioned institution of hereditary monarchy. Locke systematically destroyed Filmer’s arguments from Scripture and demonstrated on the bases of reason and history that monarchy is the least rational form of government.

But it was Locke’s *Second Treatise* (later entitled *An Essay Concerning the True Original Extend and End of Civil Government*) that had the most profound impact of any Enlightenment-era work on political science. Essentially a comprehensive philosophy of civil society, Locke’s concepts became the accepted “common sense” among all but the most intractable social and political conservatives in the 18th century.

According to Locke, human nature is a *tabula rasa* (a blank slate) that is determined by one’s own life experiences. Even though “the state of nature has a [rational and moral-based] law of nature to govern it” that is accessible to all mankind, not everyone consults it. Nonetheless, all men are potentially good, reasonable and public-spirited, and all are entitled to basic “**natural rights**” – primarily, the right to “life, liberty and property.” (By “property,” Locke meant that which is one’s own – including oneself and one’s individual autonomy.) Therefore, citizens have a right to establish a government of their own choosing, and legitimate government rests on the consent of the governed – an arrangement he termed a “**social contract**” between the people and their public officials.

Furthermore, a good government is a just and humane political system based on reason, natural rights and the rule of law. Such a government could be a constitutional monarchy, a constitutional oligarchy, or a **constitutional republic**. However, since absolute power should not be concentrated in the hands of any one person or group, Locke called for a separation of powers. But like virtually all Classical Liberals, Locke was anti-democratic. Since most men are not guided by reason, common sense and civic virtue, democracy is inherently flawed and will

inevitably degenerate into mob rule. Therefore, Locke concluded that voting rights should be reserved to the propertied classes that have a vested interest in preserving law and order and public decency. In his view, the common masses had neither the time, the education, the knowledge or the virtue to play an active role in the political process.

Locke incorporated several other principles in his *Second Treatise* that also influenced subsequent political history. His principle of **minimalist government**, set forth in his famous statement, “That government is best which governs least,” held that governmental powers must be strictly limited so as to maximize and protect basic civil liberties. As Jefferson later noted, “A government big enough to give you all you want is strong enough to take everything you have.” Today, the principle of limited government is sometimes expressed in the adage, “The bigger the government, the smaller the individual.”

Locke held that a **written constitution** based on the **rule of law** was essential in terms of limiting the size and scope of government. Of course, England’s “constitution” was a collection of proclamations, laws and documents that had accrued over centuries – often on an *ad hoc* and piecemeal basis – in contrast to a single cohesive document. In that respect, the United States had the advantage of benefitting from England’s long and arduous political evolution.

One additional Lockean principle provided a justification for the **right of revolution**. According to Locke, an arbitrary and oppressive government violates the natural rights of its citizens and therefore forfeits any claim to legitimacy. In such scenarios, citizens not only have the *right* to alter or abolish such a tyrannical government but the *obligation* to do so. Locke regarded this concept as a sacred principle, and in his mind it was not just a political but a moral issue. Anyone who rebelled against his government without just cause would be judged by God, and it was in this context that he attempted to adapt the principles of “Just War” theory to revolution. Like **Adam Smith** two generations later, Locke assumed that as reasonable, virtuous and civic-minded citizens pursued their own ends of personal freedom, a kind of “invisible hand” would guide their actions to the point that society-at-large would be impacted beneficially.

In addition to Locke, three other figures made notable contributions to the development of Classical Liberal theory. **Baron de Montesquieu** (1689-1755) was a member of the French high nobility who worked out his views on government during the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV, both of whom were resolutely committed to royal absolutism. In this context Montesquieu’s most significant contribution to Enlightenment political theory was the concept of **separation of powers** – or as the principle is often stated, “Power checks power.” Although Locke had also advocated this concept, it was a major point of emphasis in Montesquieu’s major work on political theory, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), in which he argued that despotism could be avoided only if political power was divided and shared by the three classes in French society: the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the commons. Likewise, he envisioned the sharing of governmental administrative powers among three separate and co-dependent departments: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. These ideas were considered both heretical and treasonous by Church and state officials at the time, and Montesquieu’s works were banned and placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.

Montesquieu’s ideas were influential in America in the pre- and post-Revolutionary era, and his writings were frequently cited by various Founding Fathers. In particular, his emphasis on separation of powers was promoted by the Presbyterian clergyman and statesman John Witherspoon in the Continental Congress and by James Madison, who established it as a guiding principle in structuring the federal government of the United States. According to Witherspoon, “Every good form of government must be complex... so that one may check the other.” Long before Lord Acton noted that “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” political realists understood that the ambitions of power-hungry public officials can only be contained by a well-defined system of checks-and-balances.

François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), better known by his pen-name, **Voltaire**, was a controversial French writer, poet, historian and social satirist who was often the target of political repression by the agents of Louis XIV and Louis XV. In 1717 he was imprisoned for nearly a year in the Bastille for insulting a nobleman who had political connections to the King, after which he

was exiled to England for three years. While in England he came to admire its constitutional monarchy and civil liberties, particularly its freedom of speech and religion. Later, returning to Paris, he published his observations on the superiority of the English system in *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733).

Unsurprisingly, the book was banned in France and he was forced to flee once again.

As a social rebel Voltaire was *persona non grata* for much of his adult life. As an incorrigible nonconformist he became an ardent champion of **civil liberties**. Likewise, as a deist in Catholic France he was a passionate defender of **religious tolerance** who is probably best known for having written, “I disapprove of what you say, but I shall defend to the death your right to say it.” Unfortunately, the quote is apocryphal, although it does reflect his civil libertarian orientation.

Like most all Enlightenment-era political thinkers, Voltaire was contemptuous of democracy, which he believed would inevitably reflect the idiocy of the masses. For several years he believed that an enlightened monarch such as Frederick the Great offered the best hope for a rational and just political system, but he eventually became disillusioned with the Prussian king. In his most famous work, the novella *Candide* (1759), he concluded that “It is up to us to cultivate our garden” – presumably inferring that some form of republic was the best of all possible options.

Like Voltaire, **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-78) was a natural-born rebel who detested all societal institutions, particularly the monarchy, the aristocracy and the Catholic Church. He is often regarded as the first great critic of modern society, and in works such as *Discourse On the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1754) he seems to spurn the very idea of civilization itself as a purely artificial social construct and the legalized means by which the power elite manipulates and oppresses the masses.

As a novice anthropologist, Rousseau romanticized primitive societies in which human beings lived free and equal in a “state of nature,” and in which morals were “uncorrupted” by formalized law codes and institutionalized social, economic, political and religious systems. In the opening sentence of *The Social Contract* (1762) Rousseau declared, “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.” The explanation for this

tragedy, according to him, is that “**Man is naturally good.... [but] it is through these institutions that men become bad.**” (This statement defies logic: if human beings are naturally good, why are human societies and institutions – which are no more than organized associations of human beings – innately bad?) Although Rousseau never actually advocated returning to the status of “noble savages” (in his own life he enjoyed the refinements of culture as much as anyone), he so romanticized pre-civilized societies to the point that his social philosophy has since been linked to the concept.

Because many interpreted Rousseau’s socio/political philosophy as not just countercultural but abjectly anti-cultural, his influence in England and America was minimal. Nevertheless, his writings did incorporate some themes that resonated with the spirit of the Enlightenment. Although a radical individualist in his personal life, he was no civil libertarian in theory. In practice, he believed that human beings could transform the present social order built on power, vanity, inequality, competition and exploitation through reason-based education and submission to the “**general will**” of society as a whole.

Rousseau’s doctrine of the “general will” was linked to perhaps his best-known socio/political concept, the “**social compact**.” As a religious skeptic Rousseau rejected the traditional belief in Natural (moral) Law. According to him, laws are not set down by God but are manmade and should reflect the will of the people. Therefore, the only valid basis for social harmony is a “social compact” that balances individual freedom with fair and just laws that reflect the “general will” of the people. However, he was understandably vague regarding how such an arrangement would ever be enacted and enforced in lieu of governmental coercion.

Since Rousseau based his whole socio/political philosophy on the utopian ideal of the perfectability of man, it was ultimately an impractical house of cards. Nevertheless, America’s Founding Fathers often spoke of the system they crafted under the U.S. Constitution as a “social compact” between the People and their Government, and Rousseau’s concept of the “general will” correlated to the Constitution’s concern for the “general welfare” of the American people.



