**Sources of Ideas That Shaped the American Plan of Government**

Human beings have been living together in groups for thou­sands of years. For as long as people have lived in groups, they have felt the need for some type of organization that provides order. Without order, a society would be in chaos, the few con­stantly trying to assert their will over the many. A government is a way to create order in a society. For example, in your school, the teachers and the principal are, in effect, the government. And students are the governed. You may not always agree with school policies and rules, but imagine what school would be like if there were no rules! After they declared independence from Britain in 1776, Americans needed to form a government. Where did the ideas that Americans put into practice come from? There were three main sources of the ideas that shaped the American plan of government: (1) Ancient Greece and Rome, (2) English history, and (3) European philosophers.

Ancient Greeks and Romans Contributed Ideas on Government

The first societies to experiment with ideas on government that would later influence Americans were Ancient Greece and Rome. The Ancient Greeks and Romans developed the ideas of democracy and representative government more than 2,000 years ago.

**A Democracy in Ancient Greece**. The cities of Ancient Greece were organized into city-states, or small independent nations. Athens was one such city-state. For many years, Athens was ruled by a small group of wealthy and powerful men known as the Great Council. Members of the Council passed laws that favored wealthy people like themselves. Between 750 B.C. and 550 B.C., however, this system of rule began to change.

Poorer Athenians, such as farmers and small merchants, protested the great power of the Council. They believed that the laws made by the Council harmed the interests of the middle­class and poor. Many Greeks wanted to participate directly in making laws affecting their lives. Greeks used the word “demos kratia”, to explain what they wanted. The equivalent word in English is democracy, which means government by the people.

Gradually, Athenian leaders agreed that more Greeks should be allowed to participate in the Great Council's decision-making process. They developed a political system now known as a direct democracy. In a direct democracy, people not only vote for lead­ers, but actually serve in the government. In order to decide who should be allowed to serve in the Great Council, Greek leaders developed the idea of **citizenship**. Those Athenians who were citizens had the right to participate directly in government. But how was citizenship determined? Greek lead­ers decided that only men who owned large plots of land were cit­izens. Women, slaves, and people with little or no property were not given the rights and responsibilities of Athenian citizenship. While the Ancient Greeks restricted democratic rights to a small portion of the population, the idea of democracy was born.

**A Republic in Ancient Rome**. Ancient Rome was the first nation to create a republic. A republic is a form of government in which people elect representatives to govern them. Between 750 B.C. and 350 B.C., the Romans established a **republic**. At first, only patricians - members of the Roman upper-class were allowed to vote or serve as representatives. Over several cen­turies, however, the right to vote was extended to plebians - the lower class. As more Romans gained the right to vote, they used their new power to bring about other changes in the political system. About 450 B.C. Roman citizens demanded that laws governing their lives be written down. They wanted to know what the laws were and that laws could not be changed any time their leaders wanted to. Many Romans believed that codified, or written, laws would prevent Roman leaders from abusing their power. Ancient Greek and Roman ideas and practices concerning government eventually spread to Europe and to the United States.

**English History influenced American Thinking on Government**

The first European nation to experiment with democracy was Britain. For many centuries, Britain was ruled by an absolute monarch. The king and queen were very powerful rulers. They had the power to do almost anything they wanted. Between 1100 and 1200, however, the English political system began to change.

**English common law**. In the 1100s, King Henry II attempted to expand the power of the monarchy. One way he did this was by strengthening the royal court system. The king established courts throughout the country. The king's judges assembled juries to hear cases involving crimes and disputes. The king's judges made the laws that these juries used to resolve disputes and to decide whether a person was guilty of a crime. Royal judges made laws based on the customs of the people. The royal courts decisions were gradually written down and became the basis for common law. Under common law, the courts applied the same legal ideas to all English citizens.

**The Magna Carta**. The expansion of royal power in England did not go unopposed. The king's barons, or lords, resented the development of King Henry's court system because it took away some of their traditional powers. Traditionally, barons had their own courts where they decided what the laws were. The power struggle between the king and his barons was made worse by King Henry's son, John, who placed new taxes on the barons soon after becoming king. Finally, in 1215, the barons joined together and forced King John to sign a charter that spelled out their rights. This document became known as the *Magna Carta*, or Great Charter.

To John's barons, the Magna Carta was simply a written guarantee of their traditional rights and privileges. It stated that the king could not place taxes on the barons without the consent of a group of influential barons known as the Great Council. The Magna Carta also stated that no free person could be imprisoned without a jury trial. In the 1200s, however, most English people were not free. Rather, they were serfs or peasant farmers who lived on land controlled by the king and his lords. Thus, most English people were not protected by the Magna Carta.

Despite protecting only a small portion of the British popula­tion, the Magna Carta was a major political achievement. It showed that a monarch's power could be legally limited by the citizenry.

**Parliament.** The creation of the Great Council and the sign­ing of the Magna Carta were the first steps in the development of representative government in Britain. The barons who sat on the Great Council represented the interests of other barons in discussions with the king. By the late 1200s, the Council had achieved a great deal of influence. The Council demanded that the king seek its approval before making decisions. Even­tually, the nobles who served on the Great Council became known as Parliament. The term parliament comes from the French word "parler," which means "to talk." The Great Council would discuss political ideas and policies and present its views to the king.

By the 1600s, Parliament had become more of an equal part­ner in the English government, sharing power with the monar­chy. A government where a monarch does not have absolute power is a **limited monarchy**. Even though the king and Parliament shared power, they did not always cooperate with each other. James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649), for example, claimed that they ruled by divine, or God-given, right. As a result, king and Parliament were often engaged in a bitter power struggle.

**The Bill of Rights**. In the mid-1600s, the power struggle between the monarchy and Parliament led to a civil war. Although Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans abolished the mon­archy for 10 years, it was re-established in 1660 after Cromwell's death. In the process Parliament gained more power. By the 1680s, Parliament had so much power that it was able to pick the new queen and king to succeed King James II. Parliament offered the throne to Mary, James's oldest daughter, and her hus­band William. In exchange for the throne, Parliament demanded that the new queen and king sign the *Bill of Rights*.

The Bill of Rights gave the British Parliament more power than the king and queen. It stated that the monarchy could not make or suspend laws without the consent or approval of Parlia­ment. The king and queen also needed the consent of Parliament to raise taxes and maintain an army. Finally, the Bill of Rights stated that the monarchy must not interfere in Parliamentary elections. Voters had a right to elect their representatives and the king and queen must respect voters' choices.

These three events - the signing of the Magna Carta, the creation of Parliament, and the signing of the Bill of Rights - gradually lessened the power of the British monarchy. As Parlia­ment gained more power, the idea of the "divine right of kings" died out. The British were growing more and more interested in the idea of representative government.

The first lesson discussed ways in which the king of England and Parliament abused the rights of American colonists. While many American colonists resented these abuses, they also learned positive lessons about the value of democratic govern­ment from the British. The history of political developments in England played an important role as Americans thought about the kind of government they wanted. So did the writings of sev­eral European philosophers.

**European Philosophers Also Influenced American Thinking on Government**

During the Enlightenment in the 1600s and 1700s, many political philosophers met and discussed their ideas on govern­ment together. The Enlightenment was a period in European his­tory when many educated people stressed the importance of learning and reasoning. Education was considered the key to understanding and solving society's problems. Many Enlighten­ment thinkers lived in Paris. These thinkers were known as *philosophes*, the French word for one who searches for wisdom and knowledge. Among the most influential philosophers were John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Baron de Montesquieu.

**Locke Develops the "Contract Theory" of Government**. John Locke, an English political philosopher, helped to further develop democratic ideas. In 1690, Locke published the *First and Second Treatises on Government*. These two books explained Locke's con­tract theory of government.

According to Locke, the Magna Carta and Bill of Rights pro­tected the inalienable, or natural, rights of all British citizens. Locke wrote that all people had the inalienable "right to life, lib­erty, and property" Locke believed that people created govern­ment and chose to be governed in order to live in an orderly society. In other words, government arose from an agreement, or contract, between the ruler and the ruled. Thus, a ruler only had power as long as he or she had the consent of the governed. And, as a result, a ruler could not justly deny peoples' basic rights to life, liberty, and property. Many Americans had read Locke’s book, and they agreed with what it said about government. Those who had actually read Locke’s book knew his ideas from newspapers, political pamphlets, church sermons, and discussions.

Most people in the American colonies believed that everyone had a right to life, liberty, and property. These rights were called **natural rights.** (Sometimes these are now called basic rights or fundamental rights. The idea of natural rights means that all persons have these rights just because they are human beings. Everyone is born with these rights and they should not be taken away without a person’s agreement. Many of the Founders of our government believed people receive these rights from God. Others believed that people have them because it is natural for people to have them.

**Protecting natural rights**

Although people agreed on certain natural rights, they worried about how those rights could be protected. Locke and others thought about what life would be like in a situation where there was no government and no laws. They called this situation a state of nature. They were afraid that in a state of nature their rights would be taken away.

1. The stronger and smarter people might try to take away other people's lives, liberty, or property. 2. Weaker people might band together and take away the rights of the stronger and smarter people. 3. People would be unprotected and insecure.

**The social compact**

John Locke and other philosophers developed a solution to the problems that exist in a place without government. In a state of nature.. people might feel free to do anything they want to do. However, their rights would not be protected and they would feel insecure. Locke argued that people should agree with one another to give up some of their freedom in exchange for protection and security. They should consent to follow some laws in exchange for the protection that these laws would give them. This agreement is called a social compact or social contract. A social compact is an agreement people make among themselves to create a government to rule them and protect their natural rights. In this agreement the people consent to obey the laws created by that government.

**Rousseau Expands the Contract Theory**. In his book, *The Social Contract*, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about an ideal society. In this society, people would form a community and make a contract with each other, not with a ruler. People would give up some of their freedom in favor of the needs of the majority. The community would vote on all decisions, and everyone would accept the community decision. When Rousseau wrote The Social Contract, there was not a society in the world with such a system. His vision, however, was shared by American colonists and others.

**Montesquieu Suggests Limited Government**. In his book on gov­ernment, *The Spirit of Laws*, Baron de Montesquieu developed practical suggestions for creating democratic governments. He stated that the best way to ensure that the government protects the natural rights of citizens is to limit its powers. And the best way to limit government's powers is to divide government's basic powers among a number of authorities.

By dividing powers between different branches or parts of the government, no one authority would have too much power. Mon­tesquieu referred to this as a system of checks and balances.

These philosophes' ideas might sound familiar. The last les­son contained excerpts from the Declaration of Independence. In that document, recall that Thomas Jefferson wrote that "all men are created equal; that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson had read Locke's Treatises very closely.

The people who created the United States Constitution found great political wisdom in the past. The system of government in place in the United States combines Ancient Greek and Roman practices with ideas developed more than 1,000 years later in Europe. Most Americans living at the time the Constitution was written were familiar with Greek democracy, the Roman repub­lic, the British parliamentary system, and the writings of Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu and others. The Framers of the U.S. Con­stitution were deeply influenced by the many ideas on govern­ment developed during the previous 2,000 years.

**Blackstone, Sir William (1723-1780)**

William Blackstone was a British jurist and legal scholar, whose work *Commentaries on the Laws of England* was used for more than a century

as the foundation of all legal education in Great Britain and the United States.

Blackstone was born in London on July 10, 1723. He received his education at the University of Oxford. From 1765 to 1769 Blackstone published the four volumes of his *Commentaries,* which were immediately successful in both England and the American colonies. The *Commentaries* provided an introduction to English law in a clear style that was easily understandable to the public. Although the authority of his sources, the accuracy of his statements, and the relevancy of his point of view have been subjected to severe criticism, the *Commentaries* are still significant as a comprehensive history of English law.

**Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679):**

Hobbes lived in England. His views were influenced by the fact that he lived during the English Civil War, a time of violence and famine. Hobbes' view of human nature was that man was born evil and needed a strong hand to guide him. Thus, Hobbes believed in an absolute monarch. Hobbes said that in the state of nature there is no formal law, no order, no culture, and no hope. In other words, man lived in a state of total chaos where no man has any individual rights. and all men are at war. Life is a constant battle for power, ending in death. Man needed some type of fear of authority in order to be able to be persuaded to follow the law. Hobbes discussed his beliefs on man and government in the book *Leviathan.* Hobbes believed that man gave up ALL his rights to the government, and that in return, the government provided security.

**Machiavelli:** In what is today Italy, in 1513, Machiavelli wrote a book about political power, named *The Prince*. Machiavelli believed that most people were evil and corrupt. A centralized government with a strong leader would be the best type of government. The leader, according to Machiavelli, should do anything necessary to achieve what was best for his country. "The ends justify the means." *The Prince* became a must-read for many politicians in years to come, as it was viewed as a common sense, pragmatic approach to

politics.

**Plato:** When Socrates was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by a jury in Ancient Athens in 399 BC, his student, Plato, become bitter. Plato resented the democratic system that had put his mentor, Aristotle, to death. Plato believed that the best type of leader was a King. In his book, The Republic, he wrote that man was born evil. He wrote that society is naturally divided into three groups of people; society was naturally hierarchical. The three groups were warriors, workers, including merchants and farmers, and intellects. The King should come from the group of intellects and should be a philosopher-king who rules benevolently and wisely.

**Terms**

Democracy – government by the people

Direct democracy – a system of government in which people participate directly in decision making through voting on issues

Citizenship – the status of a citizen, or member of a country, with all its duties, rights, and privileges

Republic – a system of government in which people elect representatives to govern them; also known as representative government

Absolute Monarch – an all powerful king and queen

Common Law – a system of law based on accepted customs, traditions, and past decisions

Limited Monarchy – a government in which the rule of the king and queen is held in check by a constitution or by another part of the government