

Chapter 1: Close Up on Primary Sources

John Locke and Thomas Jefferson



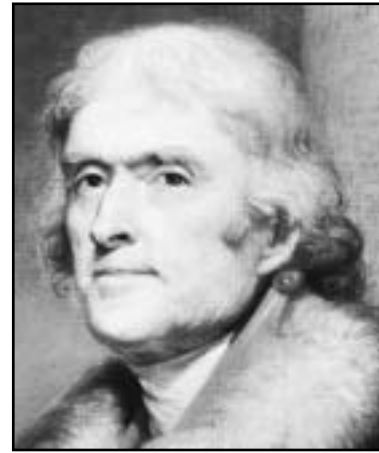
A man named Robert Skipwith was buying books for his library, and he asked his friend Thomas Jefferson for recommendations. On a list of essential works about government, Jefferson included English philosopher John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. Locke, Jefferson later wrote, was "one of the three greatest men that ever lived, without any exception." Knowing that Jefferson was a great admirer of Locke, historians have wondered how much Locke's writings influenced Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Locke and Jefferson

Recalling the two weeks he spent drafting the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson said: "I turned to neither book nor pamphlet while writing it." At the same time, he freely acknowledged the influence of political philosophers who had come before him. Discussing the origin of the Declaration, Jefferson wrote: "Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind..."

Keeping Jefferson's words in mind, read the following passage from Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. Here, Locke describes the conditions under which people are justified in overthrowing their government:

Whenever the legislators endeavor to take away, and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people...who have a right to resume their original liberty, and, by the establishment of a new legislature, provide for their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society.



Thomas Jefferson

The Declaration of Independence

Now compare Locke's words to a passage from the Declaration of Independence, in which Jefferson offers a justification for revolution. After explaining that people form governments to preserve their rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," the Declaration states:

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends [the preservation of our rights], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Did Jefferson have Locke's writings in mind while drafting the Declaration of Independence? Discussion of this question began in Jefferson's time, and continues today.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the common themes in these two passages? What are the critical differences?
2. In what ways does Jefferson build on the ideas presented by Locke?