The Declaration of Independence and John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*

**Questions to think about:**

**Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government***

1. According to Locke, what agreement have men and governments made? What does Locke think should happen if governments fail to uphold their obligations?

**The Declaration of Independence**

1. What reasons does Thomas Jefferson give for writing the Declaration of Independence?
2. Who do you think Jefferson’s audience is?
3. Under what circumstances may a people overthrow their government, according to the Declaration of Independence?
4. According to Jefferson, who is to blame for the present tension between the colonies and England: the British government or King George III? Why does he blame one and not the other?

**Tying the two sources together:**

5. What parts of the Declaration of Independence are similar to Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*? Why did Jefferson copy from Locke’s work so blatantly? (Hint: think about what was going on in England when Locke wrote his *Second Treatise on Government*, and particularly what the outcome of the Glorious Revolution was.)

**Excerpt from John Locke’s, *Second Treatise on Government* (1690).** In this excerpt, Locke, an important Enlightenment thinker, discusses his theory of a social contract between men and governments. In your textbook, this idea is termed republicanism. Locke lived in England and wrote his Second Treatise on Government as a justification for the Glorious Revolution (1688).

…Political power is that power, which every man having in the state of nature, has given up into the hands of the society, and therein to the governors, whom the society hath set over itself, with this express or tacit trust, that it shall be employed for their good, and the preservation of their property… And this power has its original only from compact and agreement, and the mutual consent of those who make up the community…

Locke goes on to assert that if government fails to fulfill the end for which it was established – the preservation of the individual’s right to life, liberty, and property – the people have a right to dissolve that government:

…The legislative acts against the trust reposed in them, when they endeavour to invade the property of the subject, and to make themselves, or any part of the community, masters, or arbitrary disposers of the lives, liberties, or fortunes of the people.

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The reason why men enter into society, is the preservation of their property; and the end why they chuse and authorize a legislative, is, that there may be laws made, and rules set, as guards and fences to the properties of all the members of the society, to limit the power, and moderate the dominion, of every part and member of the society: for since it can never be supposed to be the will of the society, that the legislative should have a power to destroy that which every one designs to secure, by entering into society, and for which the people submitted themselves to legislators of their own making; whenever the legislators endeavour 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 are thereupon absolved from any farther obedience, and are left to the common refuge, which God hath provided for all men, against force and violence. Whencesoever therefore the legislative shall transgress this fundamental rule of society; and either by ambition, fear, folly or corruption, endeavour to grasp themselves, or put into the hands of any other, an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people; by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands for quite contrary ends, and it devolves to the people, who have a right to resume their original liberty, and, by the establishment of a new legislative, (such as they shall think fit) provide for their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society. What I have said here, concerning the legislative in general, holds true also concerning the supreme executor, who having a double trust put in him, both to have a part in the legislative, and the supreme execution of the law, acts against both, when he goes about to set up his own arbitrary will as the law of the society. He acts also contrary to his trust, when he either employs the force, treasure, and offices of the society, to corrupt the representatives, and gain them to his purposes; or openly pre-engages the electors, and prescribes to their choice, such, whom he has, by solicitations, threats, promises, or otherwise, won to his designs; and employs them to bring in such, who have promised before-hand what to vote, and what to enact.

Locke responds to the charge that his theory will produce “frequent rebellion”. Indeed, says Locke, the true rebels are the magistrates who, acting contrary to the trust granted them, violate the people’s rights:

…Such revolutions happen not upon every little mismanagement in public affairs. Great mistakes in the ruling part, many wrong and inconvenient laws, and all the slips of human frailty, will be borne by the people without mutiny or murmur. But if a long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people, and they cannot but feel what they lie under, and see whither they are going; it is not to be wondered, that they should then rouze themselves, and endeavour to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the ends for which government was at first erected…

…The end of government is the good of mankind; and which is best for mankind, that the people should be always exposed to the boundless will of tyranny, or that the rulers should be sometimes liable to be opposed, when they grow exorbitant in the use of their power, and employ it for the destruction, and not the preservation of the properties of their people?
The Declaration of Independence (1776), written primarily by Thomas Jefferson. (In the Appendix to Out of Many, pp. A-1 to A-2. See also: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html.)

The Declaration of Independence is one of the great American examples of Enlightenment thinking. In the first section of the Declaration of Independence (paragraphs 1 and 2), Jefferson sets out the colonies’ theoretical justification for rebelling against Britain. This argument is based on reason and the concept of natural laws (or natural rights). According to Enlightenment thinkers, God had created the laws by which the universe operated; these are called natural laws. Because these laws, such as the right to life, liberty and property, had been created by God, governments had no right to violate them. (Jefferson uses the term “pursuit of happiness” where John Locke used the term “property”. These terms meant the same thing. For Enlightenment thinkers private property was the basis of one’s security and, therefore, one’s happiness.) The second section of the Declaration of Independence (the rest of p. A-1 and the first two paragraphs on p. A-2 of Out of Many) is the colonists’ list of grievances. Here Jefferson lists point-by-point the specific abuses the colonists have suffered, in violation of their natural rights. These specific grievances support the justification for rebelling that Jefferson described in the first section of the Declaration of Independence. In the third section of the Declaration of Independence (the paragraphs beginning “In every stage” and “Nor have we been wanting”) Jefferson describes the efforts made by the colonists communicate their grievances to the British government and the appeals the colonists made directly to the British people. In the fourth section of the Declaration of Independence (the final paragraph), Jefferson reaches his conclusion.