**Essential Questions on the Enlightenment**

**Directions:** Read the following passages and answer the questions that follow. You may work with a partner.

1. **What was the Enlightenment?**

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1. **In what way do you think the “enlightenment” was important for the creation of the American Government that we know today?**

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“**Enlightenment**” is the term used to describe a time when people began to use ideas to think about how society should be organized. And the 18th Century, people began to think about who ruled them and thought that maybe things could be different. Maybe “kings” or “queens” did not have to have all of the power. Maybe there was more to life that being a farmer, a laborer or a shop keeper. People began to think of the idea that they had rights. That kings were no different from other people. People began to see that government should provide people with something in return for their loyalties. Maybe, in exchange for our protection, we would be loyal to the king but if he did not provide protection, we could overthrow or nominate someone new. For the first time, people began to see themselves as having rights or things that were so important that they could not be taken away by any rule or government. These ideas would soon find their way into the Declaration of Independence by people like Baron de Montesquieu and John Locke.

1. **What were the founding fathers concerned about when they created the US Constitution?**

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The founding fathers were deeply concerned about government abusing its power. It was believed that when a government abused its power, took away the freedom of its citizens. As freedom or liberty, was a fundamental God given right, assurances had to be put in place to protect the people from government abusing its power.

The founding fathers consulted the works of many political philosophers when they developed government structures that protected the people from government abusing its powers. One of the most influential works was John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government (1690).

1. **Who was John Locke?**

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John Locke (1632-1704) was a British political philosopher who wrote extensively on the relationship between government and the society. It was Locke’s view that there was a **social contract** between the government and society in a citizen based government. This civil government was based on natural law, which is fundamentally tied to natural rights.

1. **What does the term “social contract” mean?**

According to Locke, men lived in a “state of nature” which meant that one is allowed to conduct one’s life as one best sees fit, free from the interference of others. There is no government in a state of nature, and people are assumed to be equally responsible for protecting each other’s’ “life, health, liberty and possessions”. The laws by which people lived were derived from God, and these laws included the notion that people were forbidden from harming one another. Thus, the state of nature is a state of liberty where people are free to pursue their own interests provided that in doing so they do not harm one another.

1. **What does Locke mean when he says that people live in a “state of nature”?**

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Still, it is not uncommon for property disputes to arise. Under the state of nature there is no government to protect a person’s property. Under the law of nature, men are allowed to defend their lives and their property, which includes the right to kill others who threaten their property or liberty. This meant that in a “state of nature” there was no government to settle disputes. This lack of a government places the community at risk.

1. **Why do you think that man living in a state of nature, is a threat to the community?**

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According to Locke, governments were created to protect property. There for there was a contract between the government and the people. An agreement from the people is voluntary and if the government does not protect the people’s property, then the government can be replaced.

**Montesquieu’s ideas on creating a “just government”**

The U.S. Constitution is organized around a separation of powers system that utilizes checks and balances. The power to legislate, enforce and review laws are separated into three different branches of government. These branches may not function with complete independence. The founding fathers believed that people would still try and abuse their power and so each branch should be tasked in checking the power of the other. Montesquieu argued that “government should be set up so that no man need be afraid of another”, which was well received by the founding fathers, particularly James Madison, who believed that a clearly defined and balanced separation of powers system that utilized checks and balances would provide a stable foundation for the new government.

1. **Who did James Madison really agree with, Lock or Montesquieu? Why?**

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1. **In this section you reviewed Thomas Hobbes (who believed that the only thing that the king had to do was protect people from harm), Lock and Montesquieu. If you had to pick one, which one did you think was the most important for the way we live today? Why do you feel that way?**

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