



IF WE LOSE JOHN LOCKE, WE LOSE AMERICA

BEN SHAPIRO

When John Adams and Benjamin Franklin read Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence, they undoubtedly recognized two things: Jefferson's peerless prose, and the political wisdom of the 17th-century English thinker, John Locke. We still admire Jefferson's skill as a writer. But we have lost an appreciation for Jefferson's philosophical mentor.

John Locke was born in 1632 in a small village in Somerset, England. He studied at Oxford to be a physician but achieved fame as a political theorist. In 1690, he authored one of the most famous political tracts in history, *Two Treatises of Government*. England had just gone through a period of great political turmoil, the so-called "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 in which the Catholic king, James II, was overthrown and replaced by a Protestant one, William of Orange.

The purpose of that revolution, which Locke supported, was not merely to substitute one king for another, but to move power away from the monarch and place it in the hands of the people and their elected representatives. The "laws and liberties of this kingdom," in Locke's view, belonged to its citizens.

This was, of course, how the American rebels saw their relationship with England. The Americans had no say in laws that the English crown and parliament were forcing on them. And—to put it mildly—they didn't like it. "No taxation without representation" was a classic expression of their displeasure.

But how to frame the argument so that the whole world would understand it? Jefferson looked to Locke for inspiration and guidance. And using Locke helped in another way: How better, Jefferson calculated, to justify an American revolution than to use the arguments that were once used to justify an English one?

So what were those arguments? Locke posited three. First: All men are created equal. Second: Certain basic rights exist independent of government. Third: Government exists to protect those rights. Let's take them in turn.

Number one: All men are created equal. Locke starts this argument at a very basic level—namely, that human beings were created equal by God. We're all part of the same species. We're all capable of doing human things. In that sense, we are equal—not in qualities or outcome, but in rights. As John Locke wrote, "Creatures of the same species...born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal...without subordination or subjection."

In this way, a king is in no way superior to a commoner such that he might violate the

commoner's rights. The king is a human being. The commoner is a human being. Each can reason. Therefore, one is equal to the other. We take this for granted now, but in 1690 it was a radical notion.

Number two: Certain basic rights exist independent of government.

Locke believed that it was man's natural state to be free. Therefore, freedom pre-exists government. That is, freedom came first; government came later. One hears this thinking expressed in Jefferson's famous phrase, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights..."

Here's how Locke put it: "The natural [state] of man is to be free from any superior power on earth. And not to be under the will or legislative authority [of a government] ..."

As rational human beings, Locke contended, we have the liberty—whether king or commoner—to think and act as we wish so long as we harm no one else.

Number three: Government exists to protect those rights.

For Locke, the purpose of government was to protect the individual's freedom and to protect the property (the land and material goods) he lawfully acquired. The last thing Locke wanted was to give the government the power to take away that liberty or undermine those property rights. If government couldn't provide those protections, or if it abused its power, it didn't deserve to exist. "The end of law," he wrote, "is not to abolish or restrain [freedom], but to preserve and enlarge freedom." Boiled down into a revolutionary slogan, we might summarize Locke's three-pronged philosophy this way: "Don't tread on me." Can't get much more American than that.

But today, Locke's ideas are under full-fledged assault. There are many Americans who believe that human beings are not created equal—that we should treat people differently based on their group identity. There are many Americans who believe that rights do not pre-exist government—that government is both our master and protector, granting and withdrawing privileges as it sees fit. And there are many Americans who believe that government should have almost unlimited power.

Everything that Locke rejected, these Americans rush to embrace. Their preference for paternalistic government is not what Locke envisioned or what Jefferson described in the Declaration of Independence.

We need to reintroduce John Locke and his ideas to a nation that has become increasingly blind to fundamental elements of its own history and character.

Because if we lose Locke, we lose America.

I'm Ben Shapiro for Prager University.