



Section 2

HISTORYMAKERS Baron de Montesquieu

Writing the Science of Government

"It is necessary by the arrangement of things, power checks power."—
Montesquieu, *On the Spirit of Laws* (1748)

Charles-Louis de Secondat, the Baron de Montesquieu, studied politics throughout his life and wrote a huge and exhaustive study of government. One of his key views was that authority should be divided. This idea became popular in England's North American colonies.

In 1689, Montesquieu was born near Bordeaux, France. His family had long served in the military and had good social position. He married a wealthy woman who had a good head for business—so good that he often let her run the family estates. When his uncle died, he became Baron de Montesquieu at age 27 and began serving as a judge.

Montesquieu soon became famous as a writer. The *Persian Letters* appeared in 1721 without identifying him as the author. The book was supposedly written by two Persian travelers who visited France and wrote letters to describe what they saw. In this way, Montesquieu was free to criticize and poke fun at French society. The king, he wrote, was a trickster who “makes people kill one another even when they have no quarrel.” The pope he called a “conjurer,” or magician. Later, Montesquieu was revealed as the author.

Now well-known, Montesquieu moved to Paris and joined in the luxurious court life there. As a result, his fortune dwindled. The combination of financial need and boredom led him to sell his judgeship. He used the money to take a long tour of Europe. He explored art and science and met leading politicians and writers. He also stayed many months in England studying its government.

Upon returning to France, Montesquieu spent two years writing a book on the English constitution. Then he decided to write a detailed study of government. For years he worked diligently, using as many as six people at a time taking notes. In 1748, after 17 years of reading, writing, and revising, he published *On the Spirit of Laws*. It filled more than 1,000 pages and broke new ground.

Montesquieu attempted to make a science of government. His work reflected Enlightenment ideas that people, using their minds, could under-

stand the world around them. However, he was not a radical who urged rule by the people instead of by kings. He was deeply conservative and hoped to maintain the privileged position of the aristocracy. He believed that the king's power was dangerous but thought that a strong aristocracy could check that authority. He admired England because the strength of its nobles limited the control of the king.

Montesquieu also saw human nature as the same around the world. However, he thought that laws and government depended on many factors, including religion, geography, and climate. Good government requires shaping laws to suit local conditions. He thought it was easier for people to enjoy liberty in a mountainous country like Switzerland or an island like England. Islands protect people from attack by other countries. Harsh conditions in the mountains, he believed, lead people to have a spirit of individualism that promotes liberty.

Montesquieu wanted to make sure that no part of the government grew too strong. The best way to preserve freedom, he said, was to divide authority. The ability to make laws, to carry out laws, and to judge laws should rest in different branches of power.

This idea was adopted in the United States when the Constitution was written. Thus, his ideas took hold in a country with traits similar to those of England and Switzerland. Separated from Europe by a vast ocean, the United States was safe from attack. In their rugged landscape, the American people developed a strong sense of individualism.

Questions

1. **Clarifying** How did Montesquieu's circumstances allow him to spend his life writing?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did Montesquieu think that it was a good idea to have different powers checking each other?
3. **Contrasting** How did Montesquieu differ from other writers of the Enlightenment?