Excerpts from Two Treatises of Government (1690) by John Locke

Directions: Read the excerpts from John Locke’s Two Treatises of Government. Consider how Locke’s theories and beliefs about what was the role of government in society, limitations placed on government, and what power the people had over the government may or may not have inspired those colonists who were in favor of declaring independence from England.

Excerpt 1:

*To understand political power, we must consider the condition in which nature puts all men. It is a state of perfect freedom to do as they wish and dispose of themselves and their possessions as they think fit, within the bounds of the laws of nature. They need not ask permission or the consent of any other man.*

*The state of nature is also a state of equality. No one has more power or authority than another. Since all human beings have the same advantages and the use of the same skills, they should be equal to each other. The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it. Reason is the law. It teaches that all men are equal and independent, and that no one ought to harm another in his life, liberty, or possessions. All men are made by one all-powerful and wise Maker. They are all servants of one Master who sent them into the world to do His business. He has put men naturally into a state of independence, and they remain in it until they choose to become members of a political society*.

What is the “state of nature”?

What is the “Law of Nature”?

How does man live in the State of Nature?

According to Locke, why is living in the state of nature dangerous?

Excerpt 2:

*If a man in the state of nature is free, if he is absolute lord of his own person and possessions, why will he give up his freedom? Why will he put himself under the control of any person or institution? The obvious answer is that the rights in the state of nature are constantly exposed to the attacks of others. Since every man is equal and since most men do not concern themselves with equity and justice, the enjoyment of rights in the state of nature is unsafe and insecure. Hence each man joins in society with others to preserve life, liberty, and property.*

According to Locke, why would man want to join others and enter a society when he is his own master over his property and possessions?

According to Locke, what are the fundamental natural rights all men are entitled to? How have the British violated the colonist’s natural rights

Excerpt 3:

*Since men hope to preserve their property by establishing a government, they will not want that government to destroy this objective. When legislators (lawmakers) try to destroy or take away the property of the people, or try to reduce them to slavery, they put themselves into a state of war with the people who can then refuse to obey the laws. When legislators try to gain or give someone else absolute power over lives, liberties, and property of the people, they abuse the power which the people had put into their hands. It is then the privilege of the people to establish a new legislature to provide for their safety and security. These principles also hold true for the executive who helps to make laws and carry them out*.

What does Locke say man has the right to do when the government tries to pass unfair laws or tries to destroy or take away the property of the people?

Why might this passage appeal to colonists?

Excerpt 4:

*Perhaps some will say that the people are ignorant and discontented (unhappy) and that a government based on their unsteady opinion and uncertain humor will be unstable. They might argue that no government can exist for long if the people may set up a new legislature whenever they do not like the old one. But people do not easily give up their old forms of government. In England, for example, the unwillingness of the people to throw out their old constitution has kept us to, or brought us back to, our old legislature of king, lords, and commons.*

What role do the people play in government?

What power do the people have in government?

Why does he say that people tend to go back to a government with a king when people may not like a new government created by the people?

Why do you think Locke says going back to a government headed by a king be dangerous?

Excerpt 5:

*However, it will be said that this philosophy may lead to frequent rebellion. To which I answer, such revolutions are not caused by every little mismanagement in public affairs. But if a long train of abuses, lies, and tricks make a government's bad intentions visible to the people, they cannot help seeing where they are going. It is no wonder that they will then rouse themselves, and try to put the rule into hands, which will secure to them the purpose for which government was originally organized.*

Why does Locke argue that political revolutions are common and necessary?

What type of revolution do you think he is talking about?

How does this passage relate to how the colonists felt about how the British ruled the colonies?