

The Powers of Government: Montesquieu Student Worksheet

Introduction:

The Baron de Montesquieu was a French nobleman and judge whose primary contributions to Enlightenment political thought came in his 1748 treatise *The Spirit of the Laws*. His political theories significantly influenced the framers of the U.S. Constitution. In this lesson, you will read a selection from *The Spirit of the Laws* in which Montesquieu talks about the nature of governmental power and the dangers that can result if this power is not used properly.

Directions:

All Web links for this lesson can be found at:

<http://www.socialstudies.com/worldlinks.html>

Excerpts from *The Spirit of the Laws*

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/montesquieu-spirit.asp>

1. What does Montesquieu say are the “three sorts of power”? What does he see as the function of each one of these powers?
2. Montesquieu claims that “the political liberty of the subject is a tranquility of mind.” In your own words, paraphrase what you think he means by this.
3. What does Montesquieu think the result will be whenever any two or all three of these powers are held by one person or group of people? Why does he think this?
4. Where does Montesquieu think the executive power of government should rest? What reasoning does he use to support this assertion?
5. Why do you think Montesquieu spends a significant amount of time discussing when and how a legislative body should meet? What conclusion does he ultimately draw regarding this issue?
6. Why does Montesquieu believe that the executive power should be able to “stop the encroachments of the legislative body,” but not vice versa? In your own words, explain his reasoning.
7. Why do you think Montesquieu had more faith that the executive power would be less “corruptible” than the legislative power?
8. Montesquieu ends by saying, “even the excess of reason is not always desirable, and...mankind generally find their account better in mediums than extremes.” What do you think he means by this? In your opinion, is this view consistent with general Enlightenment beliefs?

9. Which type of government do you think conforms most closely to the type Montesquieu describes in this selection: democracy, republic, oligarchy, monarchy, military, totalitarian, constitutional monarchy, or theocracy? Explain your reasoning.