



Biographical Briefing on Baron de Montesquieu

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Baron de Montesquieu and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Charles Louis de Secondat was born in Bordeaux, France in 1689. Despite his family's wealth, de Secondat was placed in the care of a poor family during his childhood. He later went to college and studied science and history, eventually becoming a lawyer in the local government. De Secondat's father died in 1713, and de Secondat was placed under the care of his uncle, Baron de Montesquieu. The Baron died in 1716 and left de Secondat his fortune, his office as president of the Bordeaux Parliament, and his title of Baron de Montesquieu. Later, the new Baron de Montesquieu became a member of the Bordeaux and French Academies of Science and studied the customs and governments of the countries of Europe. He gained fame in 1721 with his *Persian Letters*, which criticized the life-style and liberties of the wealthy French, as well as the church. However, Montesquieu's *On the Spirit of the Laws*, published in 1748, was his most famous book. It outlined his ideas on how government would best work.



- **Where was Montesquieu born?**
- **How did he acquire the title Baron de Montesquieu?**
- **What was the subject of *On the Spirit of the Laws*?**

Montesquieu was very concerned about the relationship between religion and violence. He writes in the *Persian Letters*, "I can assure you that no kingdom has ever had as many evil wars as the kingdom of Christ." A character in the *Persian Letters* states strongly, "in order to love and conform to one's religion it is not necessary to hate and persecute those who do not conform to it." Montesquieu argued not for atheism (belief that there is no God), but rather a secular (worldly) morality that is tolerant of many different religions. Despite Montesquieu's belief in religious tolerance, he did not feel that all people were equal. Montesquieu approved of slavery. He also thought that women were weaker than men and that they had to obey the commands of their husbands. At the same time, he felt that the gentler nature of women could make them valuable decision makers and participants in government. "It is against reason and against nature for women to be mistresses in the house...but not for them to govern an empire. In the first case, their weak state does not permit them to be preeminent (above others); in the second, their very weakness gives them more gentleness and moderation, which, rather than the harsh and ferocious virtues, can make for good government."

Stop Here
& Discuss



- **How did Montesquieu feel about religious intolerance?**
- **What did he think about slavery?**
- **Why did Montesquieu believe that women would be valuable members of government?**

According to Montesquieu, there are three forms of government: monarchy (rule by a king or queen), aristocracy (rule by the noble or wealthy class), and republicanism (rule by elected leaders). Montesquieu was opposed to absolute monarchy (where no other persons or institutions have any control over the monarch) and believed that a monarchy with limited powers makes countries the most stable and secure. People's role in government, Montesquieu believed, should be based on political virtue (moral goodness) and equality. Political virtue means that citizens voluntarily put their public interests above their individual interests. States should be kept small to make it easier for people to play a role in government. Montesquieu believed that the success of a government depends upon maintaining the right balance of power between different branches.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- **How did Montesquieu define the three types of government?**
- **Which type did Montesquieu favor?**
- **Upon what did Montesquieu believe the success of a government depends?**

Montesquieu argued that the best government is one in which power is balanced among three separate branches of government with equal but different powers. He thought that England in the eighteenth century provided the best model of government because it divided power among three parts: the king, who enforced laws; the Parliament, which created laws; and a court system, which interpreted laws. Montesquieu called this idea of divided government rule the "separation of powers." He believed in the separation of powers because he felt that if all political power is handed over to one branch, greed and corruption inevitably result. He wrote, "When the [lawmaking] and law-enforcing powers are united in the same person...there can be no liberty." According to Montesquieu, each branch of government checks (limits) the power of the other two. This way, no branch of government can threaten the freedom of the people, and tyranny can be avoided. His ideas about the separation of powers became the basis for the United States Constitution.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- **What kind of government did Montesquieu believe was best?**
- **What country provided a good model of government?**
- **Why did Montesquieu favor a separation of powers?**