Philosophical One-Liners

What have the great minds of the past said regarding power, government, and our place in society?

The founders of the United States didn't create the ideas and concepts that compose our guiding documents today, but instead borrowed heavily from voices of the past and voices of their time to create a mash-up of philosophies and governing tactics – sometimes including polar opposite views in the same document! Read and learn the following thoughts of prominent thinkers who helped influence our government.

Socrates –

"Question everything. Any problem can be solved if you learn to ask the right questions."

"I have stood by the laws and benefited from the laws my entire life. I will not abandon them now."

Plato –

"An ideal society would be governed by 'philosopher kings' who are trained in the art of reason and who have no private property, emotional or sexual relationships to distract or corrupt them."

"Every person in society should excel at something"

Aristotle –

"According to the laws of nature, some people are born to rule and others are born to be ruled."

Machiavelli –

"One who wishes to be obeyed must know how to command."

"When it comes to ruling a people, the end justifies the means."

"It is better to be feared than to be loved."

"Avoid direct confrontation. Stab your rivals in the back while pretending to be their friend."

"Politics have no relation to morals. One who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived."

Montesquieu –

"The best form of government is one in which the legislative, executive and judicial powers are separate; checking and balancing each other."

Rousseau –

"Man is born free, and is everywhere in chains."

"Direct democracy is the only way democracy will work."

"Savages in a state of nature live happily, free, equal and peaceful. It is only when we claim ownership of property that murder, inequality and war occur."

"The will of the people cannot be decided by elected representatives."

"All political power must reside within the people. There can be NO separation of powers."

Voltaire – (paraphrase of his beliefs, actual quote comes from biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall)

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Hobbes –

"In a state of nature everyone suffers from continuous fear and danger of violent death; the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

"Humans are, by nature, prone to chaos and self-destruction and only a powerful king can enforce civilized behavior and prevent the strong from destroying the weak."

"The king holds absolute power and this is more important than natural rights."

Locke –

"Natural rights of the people trump a king's powers."

"Natural rights such as life, liberty, and property exist in a state of nature and can never be taken away."

"Government has the right to govern only with the consent of the people."

"If a government violates the rights of the people, breaking the social contract, the people have the right to revolt and establish a new government."

Madison –

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

"The most common causes of factions and political conflict are the unequal distribution of wealth and property, religion, ideology and attachment to various leaders."

"The best way to prevent one faction from gaining control of the government is through a separation of power, checks and balances, and placing as much of the government as possible beyond the direct control of the majority."

Hamilton –

"Men love wealth and power. The government should play a key role in containing the natural self-interest of people."

"The United States should have a strong government with an elected king."

Gouvernor Morris –

"The principle object of government is to protect property."

"No property, no vote."

Jefferson –

"The Constitution is an enemy of freedom. It is a class-based document, intended to insure that a particular economic elite controls the national government. It contains no protection of fundamental liberties."