

Charles-Louis Montesquieu

1689–1755

WHY HE MADE HISTORY Charles-Louis Montesquieu was a French jurist and political thinker. His ideas influenced the creation of the American Constitution.



As you read the biography below, think about how Baron Montesquieu's intelligence helped him become a major political thinker.



© Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis

Charles-Louis Montesquieu, a French baron, is described as witty, modest, a good friend, kind, and brilliant. His writings reflect the new ideas that were emerging in Paris during the eighteenth century. Montesquieu's analysis and progressive ideas about politics and law were an important influence on the drafting of the American Constitution.

Montesquieu studied law at the University of Bordeaux, after which he moved to Paris to practice. He returned to Bordeaux when his father died. In 1721 Montesquieu published his first writing, *Persian Letters*, which was a **satire** of French society as seen through the eyes of two Persian travelers. This publication reflected the new ideas of the day and was a witty and forceful criticism of the social classes, monarchy, and religion. It was an instant success.

Shortly afterward, Montesquieu decided to travel and to complete his education. He left for Vienna in 1728 and did not return to Paris until three years later. His travels took him throughout Hungary, Italy, Germany, Holland, and, England.

Montesquieu decided to pursue his talent in literature when he returned to France. He threw himself into a major project based on law and

VOCABULARY

satire use of mockery to ridicule something

despotism government by a tyrant with absolute control

Charles-Louis Montesquieu, *continued*

Biography

politics. After extensive research, Montesquieu published *The Spirit of Laws*, one of the greatest works on political theory and the history of law. This work brought him fame but also criticism, especially from the Catholic Church in Rome, where it was put on the list of banned books.

In this work, three themes are most notable. The first theme is the classification of governments into three types: the republic, based on virtue; the monarchy, based on honor; and **despotism**, based on fear. In his second theme, Montesquieu proposes that a government's power should be divided into three branches that work independently of each other—legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The third theme that Montesquieu wrote about is that the individual and society are affected by physical climate. He believed that human dignity must be upheld, and that slavery, despotism, and intolerance are evil. These ideas led Montesquieu to be considered one of the leading political philosophers of his time.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Identify What are the three classifications of government in Charles-Louis Montesquieu's work, *The Spirit of Laws*?

2. Evaluate Which aspects of Montesquieu's thinking do you think influenced the writing of the American Constitution?

ACTIVITY

3. Imagine that you are a book critic assigned to write about the themes covered in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*. Write a short paper describing which of the three main themes that you consider being the most important. Explain your answer.