NEED FOR GOVERNMENT/ PHILOSOPHER’S READING

**Locke’s Natural Rights:** The philosopher John Locke held a different, more positive, viewof human nature. He believed that people could learn from experience and improvethemselves. As reasonable beings, they had the natural ability to govern their ownaffairs and to look after the welfare of society. Locke criticized absolute monarchy andfavored the idea of self-government.According to Locke, all people are born free and equal, with three natural rights-life, liberty, and property. The purpose of government, said Locke, is to protect theserights.If a government fails to do so, citizens have a right to overthrow it. Lockepublished his ideas in 1690, two years after the Glorious Revolution. His book, TwoTreatises on Government, served to justify the overthrow of James II.Locke’s theory had a deep influence on modern political thinking. His statementthat a government’s power comes from the consent of the people is the foundation ofmodern democracy. The ideas of government by popular consent and the right to rebelagainst unjust ruler helped to inspire struggles for liberty in Europe and the Americas.

**Rousseau: Champion of Freedom:** A third great philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau(roo-SOH), was passionately committed to individual freedom. The son of a poor Swisswatchmaker, Rousseau worked as an engraver, music teacher, tutor, and secretary.Eventually, Rousseau made his way to Paris and won recognition as a writer of essays.There he met and befriended other philosophers, although he felt out of place in thecircles of Paris high society in which they traveled. A strange, brilliant, and controversial figure, Rousseau strongly disagreed withother Enlightenment thinkers on many matters. Most philosophers believed that reason,science, and art would improve life for all people. Rousseau, however, argued thatcivilization corrupted people’s natural goodness. “Man is born free, and everywhere heis in chains,” he wrote. In the earliest times, according to Rousseau, people had lived asfree and equal individuals in a primitive “state of nature”. As people became civilized,however, the strongest among them forced everyone else to obey unjust laws. Thus,freedom and equality were destroyed.Rousseau believed that the only good government was one that was freelyformed by the people and guided by the “general will” of society- a direct democracy.Under such a government, people agree to give up some of their freedom in favor of thecommon good. In 1762, he explained his political philosophy in a book called The SocialContract.Rousseau’s view of the social contract differed greatly from that of Hobbes. ForHobbes, the social contract was an agreement between a society and its government.For Rousseau, it was an agreement among free individuals to create a society and agovernment.

**Montesquieu and the Separation of Powers:** Another influential French writer, theBaron de Montesquieu (MAHN-tuh-SKYOO), devoted himself to the study of political

liberty. An aristocrat and lawyer, Montesquieu studied the history of ancient Rome. Heconcluded that Rome’s collapse was directly related to its loss of political liberties. Like Voltaire, Montesquieu believed that Britain was the best-governed countryof his own day. Here was a government, he thought, in which power was balancedamong three groups of officials. The British king and his ministers held executive power.They carried out the laws of the state. The members of Parliament held legislative, orlawmaking, power. The judges of the English courts held judicial power. Theyinterpreted the laws to see how each applied to a specific case. Montesquieu called thisdivision of power among different branches separation of powers.Montesquieu oversimplified the British system (it did not actually separatepowers this way). His idea, however, became a part of his most famous book, On theSpirit of Laws (1748). In his book, Montesquieu proposed that separation of powerswould keep any individual or group from gaining total control of the government.“Power”, he wrote, “should be a check to power”. Each branch of government wouldserve as a check on the other two. This idea later would be called “checks andbalances”. Montesquieu’s book was admired by political leaders in the British colonies ofNorth America. His ideas about separation of powers and checks and balances becamethe basis for the United States Constitution.

QUESTIONS

1.Who stresses that government was a social contract among men?

2.Which philosopher stated that “man’s natural rights are life, liberty, and property”?

3.Who believed that government’s power should not be controlled by one, but divided into different branches?

4.Who believed that majority rule was the best rule.

5. Who stated that the different branches should have checks upon each other?