



Founders' Influence:  
SS.7.CG.1.3  
**Influential Documents**  
**READING**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**SS.7.CG.1.3 Benchmark Clarification 1:** Students will identify the important ideas contained in the Magna Carta (e.g., due process of law, limitation of government power, right to justice, right to fair trial), Mayflower Compact (e.g., consent of the governed, self-government), English Bill of Rights (e.g., right to life, liberty and property; no taxation without representation; right to a speedy and fair jury trial; no excessive punishments) and Thomas Paine's Common Sense (representative self-government).

The **Magna Carta** was written by English noblemen to force King John of England to protect certain rights of the people and to limit the king's powers. The document said that the king must follow the laws of the land. It also allowed the people there to have liberties they did not have before. These liberties included the right to a trial by jury for all accused of crimes, the right to justice against unlawful imprisonment, and due process of law to include no taxation without the consent of the barons. One important idea of the Magna Carta was **limited monarchy**. This meant that the king must share power with Parliament (England's legislature) and must follow the constitution and the laws passed by Parliament. Two other ideas came from the Magna Carta: rule by a constitution and **common law**. The Magna Carta, although not totally successful, became a symbol of the idea that even a king was not above the law.

The **Magna Carta** influenced the colonists' views on the purpose of government in two main ways. First, it helped to establish **limited government** in the United States through the three branches outlined in the U.S. Constitution. Each branch has the power to check or limit the power of the other two. The system of **checks and balances** keeps any one branch from getting too powerful. Second, like the Magna Carta, the U.S. Constitution is the law of the land and no one is above it.

The **English Bill of Rights** stated that every person possesses individual rights that must be protected. The rights in the document were enumerated, or listed, and included the right to bear arms and the right to petition the king (to ask the king to solve problems). This document was also important because it sent the message that the consent of the people in government was necessary. The English Bill of Rights influenced the colonists' views about the purposes of government because ideas from it were included in two founding documents: the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. First, in the Declaration of Independence, the colonists wrote that they held certain truths to be self-evident (obvious), that all men are created equal and they have certain unalienable rights that include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Also, the government receives its power from the consent of the governed. Second, the influence of the English Bill of Rights can be seen in the Bill of Rights, which includes the right to petition the government, freedom of speech, peaceable (peaceful) assembly, freedom of the press, and the right to bear arms.

The **Mayflower Compact** set up a government with the first written set of laws for the English settlers who arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts. This document introduced the idea of **self-government** in the colonies. The Plymouth colonists wanted a government based on the

**consent of the governed** and on fair laws that applied equally to everyone. They also believed in the importance of a social contract, which means that people give their permission to being governed as long as the government protects the people's rights and liberties. The **Mayflower Compact** also influenced the colonists' ideas about the purpose of government through ideas included in the U.S. Constitution. Most importantly, the idea of **self-government** is central to the U.S. Constitution. By beginning the U.S. Constitution with the words "We the People," the Founders made it clear that the people establish (create) the government. Influences from the Mayflower Compact are also found in the Fourteenth Amendment, which states: "*No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.*" This amendment reflects the colonists' goal of having fair and equal laws for all.

**Common Sense** was a pamphlet (booklet) written in 1776 by Thomas Paine, who encouraged colonists to seek independence from England. The pamphlet accused King George III of England of **tyranny**, challenged his right to power over the colonists, and blamed him for treating the colonists unfairly. Paine also wrote that the colonies needed a written constitution with a set of rules that everyone would have to follow and a government that could not abuse its power. *Common Sense* influenced many colonists to support the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence argued that the people must change or abolish (remove from power) a destructive government and replace it with one that meets the needs of the people. *Common Sense* also influenced the government that was later established in the United States. It supported the idea that the U.S. Constitution is the law of the land. It also supported the government established by the U.S. Constitution, where none of the three branches of government can become too powerful.

**checks and balances** - a principle of the federal government, according to the U.S. Constitution, that allows each branch of government to limit the power of the other branches

**common law** - law based on customs and prior legal decisions; used in civil cases

**Common Sense** - a pamphlet published by Thomas Paine in 1776 to convince the American colonists to support becoming independent from England

**consent of the governed** - an agreement made by the people to establish a government and obey its laws

**English Bill of Rights** - a government document that expanded the powers of the English Parliament and expanded the rights of the people, as well as further limited the rights of the king; written by the members of the English Parliament in 1689

**limited government** - a government that has been limited in power by a constitution, or written agreement

**limited monarchy** - a system of government in which the king or queen shares authority with an elected legislature and agrees to be bound by a constitution or a set of laws, also known as a constitutional monarchy

**Magna Carta** - a government document that limited the power of the king of England and protected the rights of the nobility; written by the English nobles in 1215

**Mayflower Compact** - an agreement between individuals that created a government that would provide order and protect the rights of the colonists; written by a group of English Puritans in Massachusetts in 1620

**self-government** - popular or representative system where the people create and run their own government

**tyranny** - a government that abuses its power