



Magna Carta

A copy from the British Library, of the original document from 1215 AD.

It is hard to overestimate (oh, sorry) the value of the ideas contained in the Magna Carta, to modern civilization. The Magna Carta is renowned above all else, for a general principle that the ruler is not above the law—that the king has to abide by certain principles when enforcing laws and edicts. This can be seen throughout this document, where the king is forced to get the verdict of a jury of the barons' peers to convict someone, or deprive them of liberty or property.

Additional themes are freedom of churches from government control, trial by jury, taxation with representation, and even a council that would monitor the king's adherence to these rights, as well as provide restitution to victims in the event that the king did in fact overstep his boundaries.

Prominent themes in the Magna Carta appear in later historical documents. As early as 1641, American colonists in Massachusetts composed a *Body of Liberties* that contained many of these freedoms. When the English invited William and Mary of Orange to be their rulers in 1688, as part of the deal, King William introduced the *English Bill of Rights* to Parliament. Fundamental ideas of the United States Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments) also can be seen in the Magna Carta.

Some have criticized the Magna Carta for being a document that only granted freedom to the barons who corralled King John into signing this document. As far as this goes, that is true. However, as time went on in England, the rights embedded in this document were seen as guaranteeing these freedoms for all Englishmen, not simply those of the nobles.

A fascinating perspective on the value of a political heritage that emphasizes these points can be seen in Simon Bolivar's *Address at Angostura* (1819), where he resented the fact that unlike the English colonists who rebelled from Britain, the Spanish colonists in Latin America were not allowed to govern themselves, and had no such heritage to draw upon. Also, one can look at the very rocky path to limited government that many peoples and cultures (that did not look upon English history as part of their legacy) around the world have taken, Russia today being a primary example of this.