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John Locke and American Politics

The English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) has played a central role in American intellectual life and culture since the eighteenth century. Although he never set foot in what would become the United States, Locke has captivated Americans in ways few other philosophers (American or not) ever have. Locke's influence on Americans has, however, varied substantially over time. In the middle part of the twentieth century, Americans began to conceive of Locke's importance in radically new ways, identifying him as a key figure in a newfound liberal tradition that resisted totalitarian and communist threats. This paper will explore the nature of Locke's influence in the middle part of the twentieth century, while paying particular attention to how, by the 1960s, Locke became an instrument for some of the most contentious intellectual and political debates in American college classrooms, the halls of Congress, and beyond.