

# King John and the Magna Carta

In 1215, King John of England was forced to sign the Magna Carta stating that the king was not above the law of the land and protecting the rights of the people. Today, the Magna Carta is considered one of the most important documents in the history of democracy.

## Background

John became king in 1199 when his brother, Richard the Lionheart, died without any children. John had a bad temper and could be very cruel. He was not liked by the English Barons.

John also had to deal with a lot of issues while he was king. He was constantly at war with France. To fight this war he placed heavy taxes on the Barons of England. He also angered the Pope and was excommunicated from the church.

## The Barons Rebel

By 1215, the barons of northern England had had enough of John's high taxes. They decided to rebel. Led by Baron Robert Fitzwalter, they marched on London calling themselves the "army of God". After taking London, John agreed to negotiate with them.



## Signing the Magna Carta

King John met the barons on June 15, 1215 at Runnymede, a neutral site just west of London. Here the barons demanded that King John sign a document called the Magna Carta guaranteeing them certain rights. By signing the document, King John agreed to do his duty as King of England, upholding the law and running a fair government. In return, the barons agreed to stand down and surrender London.

## Civil War

It turns out that neither side had any intention of following the agreement. Not long after signing, King John attempted to nullify the agreement. He even had the Pope declare the document "illegal and unjust". At the same time, the barons didn't surrender London.

Soon the country of England was facing civil war. The barons, led by Robert Fitzwalter, were supported by French troops. For a year the barons fought King John in what is called the First Barons' War. However, King John died in 1216, putting a quick end to the war.

## Details of the Magna Carta

The Magna Carta was not a short document. There were actually 63 clauses in the document outlining various laws that the barons wanted the King to enforce. Some of the rights these clauses promised included:

- Protection of church rights
- Access to swift justice
- No new taxes without the Barons' agreement
- Limitations on feudal payments
- Protection from illegal imprisonment
- A council of 25 Barons who would insure that King John followed the laws

## Legacy

Although King John did not follow the agreement, the ideas put forth in the Magna Carta became lasting principles of liberty to the English. Three of the clauses are still in force as English law including the freedom of the English Church, the "ancient liberties" of the City of London, and the right to due process.

The ideas of the Magna Carta also influenced the constitutions and development of other countries. The American colonists used the rights guaranteed in the document as a reason to rebel and form their own country. Many of these rights are written into the [United States Constitution](#) and the [Bill of Rights](#).

## Interesting Facts about the Magna Carta

- Magna Carta is Latin for Great Charter. The document itself was originally written in Latin.
- King John is often portrayed as the villain in the story of Robin Hood.
- The council of 25 barons that the Magna Carta formed to watch over the king eventually became the Parliament of England.
- Archbishop Stephen Langton helped to negotiate the agreement between the two sides. He is also credited with dividing the Bible up into the modern system of chapters used today.
- The Magna Carta was influenced by the Charter of Liberties signed by King Henry I in 1100.

# King John and the Magna Carta Questions

1. The King of what country was forced to sign the Magna Carta?
2. Which king signed the Magna Carta?
3. What year was the Magna Carta signed?
4. Is it true or false that both sides thought the agreement was good for the country and had every intention of keeping it? Explain.
5. What happened after the document was signed?
6. In what language was the Magna Carta written?
7. What government body was eventually formed from the council of 25 barons?
8. Is it true or false that some of the clauses of the Magna Carta are still in force as English Law today? If so, what are they?
9. What finally put an end to the civil war between the barons and the king?
10. Which of the below was NOT a part of the Magna Carta?
  - a. The protection of church rights
  - b. A council of 25 barons to watch over the king
  - c. The right for each free man to vote for king
  - d. No new taxes without the agreement of the barons
  - e. Protection from illegal imprisonment