

DISCOURSES CONCERNING GOVERNMENT

ALGERNON SIDNEY (1623-1683)

from *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, pp. 43-45

Involved in some of the same anti-monarchical causes as John Locke, Algernon Sidney was caught up in the conspiracy to oust King Charles II. He was beheaded on December 7, 1683, a martyr to the English Whig cause. Fifteen years after his death, his Discourses Concerning Government was published. A hero to John Adams and widely read in the American colonies, Sidney famously inscribed the following in the Visitor's Book at the University of Copenhagen: "This hand, enemy to tyrants, by the sword seeks peace under liberty." This inscription later inspired the state motto of Massachusetts.

1698

CHAPTER ONE

SECTION 17. *God having given the Government of the World to no one Man, nor declared how it should be divided, left it to the Will of Man.*

....The words of the Apostle, *If we are children, we are therefore heirs and co-heirs with Christ*, are the voice of God and nature; and as the universal law of God and nature is always the same, every one of us who have children have the same right over them, as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had over theirs; and that right which was not devolved to any one of them, but inherited by them all (I mean the right of father as father) not the peculiar promises, which were not according to the law of nature, but the election of grace, is also inherited by every one of us, and ours, that is, by all mankind. But if that which could be inherited was inherited by all, and it be impossible that a right of dominion over all can be due to everyone, then all that is or can be inherited by everyone is that exemption from the dominion of another, which we call liberty, and is the gift of God and nature....

CHAPTER THREE

SECTION 21. *It cannot be for the good of the People that the Magistrate have a power above the Law: and he is not a Magistrate who has not his power by Law.*

Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, Thomas G. West, ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1996), 53, 56–57, 439–40, 442, 444. This material appears on the Online Library of Liberty [<http://app.libraryofliberty.org>] hosted by Liberty Fund, Inc.

...But nothing can be more absurd than to say, that one man has an absolute power above law to govern according to his will, *for the people's good, and the preservation of their liberty*...

...And as 'tis folly to suppose that princes will always be wise, just and good, when we know that few have been able alone to bear the weight of a government, or to resist the temptations to ill, that accompany an unlimited power, it would be madness to presume they will for the future be free from infirmities and vices...

...If the public safety be provided, liberty and propriety secured, justice administered, virtue encouraged, vice suppressed, and the true interest of the nation advanced, the ends of government are accomplished; and the highest must be contented with such a proportion of glory and majesty as is consistent with the public; since the magistracy is not instituted, nor any person placed in it for the increase of his majesty, but for the preservation of the whole people, and the defence of the liberty, life and estate of every private man...