

DISCOURSES CONCERNING GOVERNMENT

ALGERNON SIDNEY (1623–1683)

Involved in some of the same anti-monarchical causes as John Locke, 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.*

... But if the dominion of the whole world cannot belong to any one man, and every one have an equal title to that which should give it; or if it did belong to one, none did ever exercise it in governing the whole, or dividing it; or if he did divide it, no man knows how, when, and to whom; so that they who lay claim to any parcels can give no testimony of that division, nor show any better title than other men derived from his first progenitor, to whom 'tis said to have been granted; and that we have neither a word, nor the promise of a word from God to decide the controversies arising thereupon, nor any prophet giving testimony of his mission that takes upon him to do it, the whole fabric of our author's patriarchal dominion falls to the ground; and they who propose these doctrines, which (if they were received) would be a root of perpetual and irreconcilable hatred in every man against every man, can be accounted no less than ministers of the Devil, tho they want the abilities he has sometimes

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.

infused into those who have been employed upon the like occasions. And we may justly conclude that God having never given the whole world to be governed by one man, not prescribed any rule for the division of it; nor declared where the right of dividing or subdividing that which every man has should terminate; we may safely affirm that the whole is forever left to the will and discretion of man: We may enter into, form, and continue in greater or lesser societies, as best pleases ourselves: The right of paternity as to dominion is at an end, and no more remains, but the love, veneration, and obedience, which proceeding from a due sense of the benefits of birth and education, have their root in gratitude, and are esteemed sacred and inviolable by all that are sober and virtuous. And as 'tis impossible to transfer these benefits by inheritance, so 'tis impossible to transfer the rights arising from them. No man can be my father but he that did beget me; and 'tis as absurd to say I owe that duty to one who is not my father, which I owe to my father, as to say, he did beget me, who did not beget me; for the obligation that arises from benefits can only be to him that conferred them. 'Tis in vain to say the same is due to his heir; for that can take place only when he has but one, which in this case signifies nothing: For if I being the only son of my father, inherit his right, and have the same power over my children as he had over me; if I had one hundred brothers, they must all inherit the same; and the law of England, which acknowledges one only heir, is not general, but municipal, and is so far from being general, as the precept of God and nature, that I doubt whether it was ever known or used in any nation of the world beyond our island. 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

35 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.*

...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.... 5

...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 defense of the liberty, life and estate of every private man.... 10 15