

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 2: Principles of the American Revolution

2.2 Primary Source

ALGERNON SIDNEY

Background: Algernon Sidney (1623-1683) was an English political theorist during the Enlightenment era and author of *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698). Although of noble birth, Sidney fought in the English Civil War on the side of Parliament. He was later executed for treason by King Charles II. In the process, he became an important republican martyr—admired by many members of America’s founding generation. His *Discourses Concerning Government* attacked the divine right of kings, championed the rule of law (and a vision of limited government), celebrated governments founded on the consent of the people, and justified the right of the people to alter or abolish their government if it failed to serve the common good. Sidney’s ideas helped to inspire both the Glorious Revolution in England and the American Revolution across the Atlantic.

Excerpt:

View the document on the National Constitution Center’s website [here](#).

Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*:

The divine right of kings makes no sense; it is the death of liberty. [T]here is more than ordinary extravagance in [Robert Filmer’s] assertion, that *the greatest liberty in the world is for a people to live under a monarch*, when his whole book is to prove, that this monarch hath his right from God and nature, is endowed with an unlimited power of doing what he pleaseth, and can be restrained by no law. If it be liberty to live under such a government, I desire to know what is slavery. . . .

All we seek is government based on the consent of the governed, not the divine right of kings. It were a folly hereupon to say, that the liberty for which we contend, is of no use to us, since we cannot endure the solitude, barbarity, weakness, want, misery and dangers that accompany it whilst we live alone, nor can enter into a society without resigning it; for the choice of that society, and the liberty of framing it according to our own wills, for our own good, is all we seek. This remains to us whilst we form governments, that we ourselves are judges how far ’tis good for us to recede from our natural liberty; . . . and the difference between the best government and the worst, doth wholly depend upon a right or wrong exercise of that power. If men are naturally free, such as have wisdom and understanding will always frame good governments: But if they are born under the necessity of perpetual slavery, no wisdom can be of use to them; but all must forever depend on the will of their lords, how cruel, mad, proud or wicked soever they be. . . .

We come together and form a government to avoid a life of anxiety and violence. The weakness in which we are born, renders us unable to attain this good of ourselves: we want help in all things, especially in the greatest. The fierce barbarity of a loose multitude, bound by no law, and regulated by no discipline, is wholly repugnant to it: Whilst every man fears his neighbour, and has no other defence than his own strength, he must live in that perpetual

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anxiety which is equally contrary to that happiness, and that sedate temper of mind which is required for the search of it. The first step towards the cure of this pestilent evil, is for many to join in one body, that everyone may be protected by the united force of all; and the various talents that men possess, may by good discipline be rendered useful to the whole; as the meanest piece of wood or stone being placed by a wise architect, conduces to the beauty of the most glorious building. But every man bearing in his own breast affections, passions, and vices that are repugnant to this end, and no man owing any submission to his neighbour; none will subject the correction or restriction of themselves to another, unless he also submit to the same rule. . . .

Every constitution may become corrupt; if so, we must return to our founding principles.

All human constitutions are subject to corruption, and must perish, unless they are timely renewed, and reduced to their first principles

We are all born with natural rights, including freedom. The creature having nothing, and being nothing but what the creator makes him, must owe all to him, and nothing to anyone from whom he has received nothing. Man therefore must be naturally free, unless he be created by another power than we have yet heard of. . . . God only who confers this right upon us, can deprive us of it

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**