

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

John Locke On Tyranny

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John Locke, born at Wrington, near Bristol, England in 1632 devoted his life to the study of politics and religion. Educated at Oxford, he was a teacher by trade who actively conversed with famous “men of letters” of his time. He published numerous essays on government which greatly offended public officials. As a result he spent considerable time pursuing his career and correspondence in France and Holland. He was one of the most influential writers of his time on the newly considered aspects of freedom, rights of man and social problems. His writings greatly influenced the thoughts and perspectives of this nation’s Founders.

We don’t have to wonder. We know many of the writings and understand much about the moral, religious and political experiences which inspired the early American colonists to participate in the social upheaval that resulted in our national independence. What escapes us is how they rationalized the rebellion which overturned the concept of the monarchy as legitimate government for the concept of the sovereignty of the individual. And, what motivation inspired them to fight to the death to support their convictions.

As we struggle to determine in our own hearts and minds how much is enough we naturally look for measures against which to evaluate personal actions which may be justified to oppose tyrannical government. Conviction must be reasoned by each individual, it cannot very well be compelled or borrowed from another. So it is each of us seeks justification. As we work to develop personal insight, one resource we would be remiss in neglecting is the writings of John Locke. Just in case you thought the current problems with overbearing government was something new, consider the following excerpts from Locke’s book entitled “Of Civil Government” written in 1689:

“He that will with any cleanness speak of the Dissolution of Government, ought in the first place to distinguish between the dissolution of the society, and the dissolution of the government. That what makes the community, and brings men out of the loose state of nature, into one politick society, is the agreement which every one has with the rest to incorporate, and act as one body, and so be one distinct commonwealth. The usual, and almost only way whereby this union is dissolved, is the inroad of foreign force making a conquest upon them. For in that case, (not being able to maintain and support themselves, as one intire and independent body) the union belonging to the body which consisted therein, must necessarily cease, and so every one return to the state he was in before, with a liberty to shift for himself, and provide for his own safety as he thinks fit in some other society. Whenever the society is dissolved, ‘tis certain the government of that society cannot remain. Thus conquerors swords often cut up governments by the roots, and mangle societies to pieces, separating the subdued or fettered multitude from the protection of, and dependent on that society which ought to have preserved them from violence...

Besides this over-turning from without, governments are dissolved from within, ...

Fourthly, the delivery also of the people into the subjection of a foreign power, either by the prince, or by the legislative, is certainly a change of the legislative, and so a dissolution of the government. For the end why people entered into society being to be preserved one intire, free, independent society, to be governed by its own laws; this is lost, whenever they are given up into the power of another....

The reason why men enter into society, is the preservation of their property; and the end why they choose and authorize a legislative, is , that there may be laws made, and rules set, as guards and fences to the properties of all the members of the society, to limit the power, and moderate the dominion of every part and member of the society. For since it can never be supposed to be the will of the society, that the legislative should have a power to destroy that, which every one designs to secure, by entering into society, and for which the people submitted themselves to legislators of their own making, whenever the legislators endeavour to take away, and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved form any further obedience, and are left to the common refuge, which God hath provided for all men, against force and violence. Whensoever therefore the legislative shall transgress this fundamental rule of society; and either by ambition, fear, folly or corruption, endeavor to grasp themselves, or put into the hands of any other an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people; by this breach of trust they forfeit the power, the people had put into their hands, for quite contrary ends, and it devolves to the people, who have the right to resume their original liberty and, by the establishment of a new legislative, (such as they shall think fit) provide of their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society.”

“As usurpation is the exercise of power, which another hath a right to; so tyranny is the exercise of power beyond right, which no body can have a right to. And this is making use of the power any one has in his hands, not for the good of those who are under it, but for his own private separate advantage. When the Governor, however instituted, makes not the Law, but his will, the Rule; and his commands and actions are not directed to the preservation of the properties of his people, but the satisfaction of his own ambition, revenge, covetousness, or any other irregular passion.”

“Where-ever Law ends, tyranny begins, if the Law be transgressed to another’s harm. And whosoever in authority exceeds the power given him by the law, and makes use of the force, he has under his command, to compass that upon the subject, which the law, allows not, ceases in that to be a magistrate, and acting without authority, may be opposed, as any other man, who by force invades the rights of another.”

“The state of War is a state of enmity and destruction: And therefore declaring by word or action, not a passionate and hasty, but a sedate settled design, upon another man’s life, puts him in a state of War with him against whom he has declared such an intention, and so has exposed his life to the offense, and espouses his quarrel; it being reasonable and just I should have a right to destroy that, which threatens me with destruction. For by the fundamental Law of Nature, man being to be preserved, as much as possible, when all cannot be preserved, the safety of the innocent is to be preferred: And one may destroy a man who makes War upon him, or has discovered an enmity to his being, for the same reason, that he may kill a wolf or a lion; because such men are not under the ties of the common-law of reason, have no other rule, but

that of force and violence, and so may be treated as beasts of prey, those dangerous and noxious creatures, that will be sure to destroy him, whenever he falls into their power.

And hence it is, that he who attempts to get another man into his absolute power, does thereby put himself into a state of war with him; it being to be understood as a declaration of a design upon his life. For I have reason to conclude, that he who would get me into his power without my consent, would use me as he pleased, when he had got me there, and destroy me too, when he had a fancy to it; for no body can desire to have me in his absolute power, unless it be to compel me by force to that, which is against the right of my freedom, i.e. make me a slave. To be free from such force is the only security of my preservation; and reason bids me look on him, as an enemy to my preservation, who would take away that freedom, which is the sense to it; so that he who makes an attempt to enslave me, thereby puts himself into a state of war with me. He that in the state of nature, would take away the freedom, that belongs to any one in that state, must necessarily be supposed to have a design to take away every thing else, that freedom being the foundation of all the rest: As he that in the state of society, would take away the freedom belonging to those of that society or common-wealth, must be supposed to design to take away from them everything else, and so be looked on as in a state of War.”

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