

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 2: Principles of the American Revolution

2.2 Primary Source

JOHN LOCKE

Background: John Locke (1632-1704) was an English political theorist during the Enlightenment era and the author of *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), and *Two Treatises on Government* (1690). From 1760 to 1800, Locke's works on government and religious toleration made him one of the most cited secular authors in America. His *Second Treatise on Government* taught the founding generation important lessons about the social contract, natural rights, and the right of revolution.

Excerpt:

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

John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*:

Let's begin by considering people in a state of nature, before they form a government. To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.

The state of nature is a state of equality. A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another

It is also a state of liberty, but that liberty has its limits. But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself

The state of nature is governed by natural law; everyone is born free and equal and, generally speaking, may not harm others. The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station wilfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another. . . .

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Everyone has a right to his/her own body and to labor freely. Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. . . .

Government is based on the consent of the governed; and once the people form a government, a majority has the authority to govern. MEN being . . . by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this state, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not of it. This any number of men may do, because it injures not the freedom of the rest; they are left as they were in the liberty of the state of nature. When any number of men have so consented to make one community or government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one body politic, wherein the majority have a right to act and conclude the rest. . . .

People enter into government to protect their property and to keep them safe and secure; when the government fails to hold up its end of the bargain, the people can get rid of it and form another one. The reason why men enter into society, is the preservation of their property; and the end why they chuse 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: . . . 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 from any farther 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, endeavour 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 a right to resume their original liberty, and, by the establishment of a new legislative, (such as they shall think fit) provide for their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society. What I have said here, concerning the legislative in general, holds true also concerning the supreme executor

The people will rebel if the government abuses them. But it will be said, this hypothesis lays a ferment for frequent rebellion. To which I answer, . . . [n]o more than any other hypothesis: for when the people are made miserable, and find themselves exposed to the ill usage of arbitrary

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power, cry up their governors, as much as you will, for sons of Jupiter; let them be sacred and divine, descended, or authorized from heaven; give them out for whom or what you please, the same will happen. The people generally ill treated, and contrary to right, will be ready upon any occasion to ease themselves of a burden that sits heavy upon them. They will wish, and seek for the opportunity, which in the change, weakness and accidents of human affairs, seldom delays long to offer itself. . . .

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