

## Discourses concerning Government

Algernon Sidney  
1681–1683

*Government exists for the sake of the governed; the power of the king must therefore be limited. The best governments combine democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy as a check on the executive. Robert Filmer wants no such limits. History shows that the people have regularly rebelled against the exercise of absolute power and delivered authority over to those whom they judged to be good and just. We surrender a measure of our natural liberty so that we might live as equals under law. The people do not seek liberty without restraint; it is tyrants who desire unlimited power.*

### Chapter Two

#### Section 3

Government Is Not Instituted for the Good  
of the Governor but of the Governed  
and Power Is Not an Advantage but a Burden

The follies with which our author [Robert Filmer] endeavours to corrupt and trouble the world, seem to

## Readings in American Deism

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proceed from his fundamental mistakes of the ends for which governments are constituted; and from an opinion, that an excessive power is good for the governor, or the diminution of it a prejudice: whereas common sense teaches, and all good men acknowledge, that governments are not set up for the advantage, profit, pleasure or glory of one or a few men, but for the good of the society.

For this reason Plato and Aristotle find no more certain way of distinguishing between a lawful king and a tyrant, than that the first seeks to procure the common good, and the other his own pleasure or profit; and doubt not to declare, that he who according to his institution was the first, destroys his own being, and degenerates into the latter, if he deflect from that rule: He that was the best of men, becomes the worst; and the father or shepherd of the people makes himself their enemy. And we may from hence collect, that in all controversies concerning the power of magistrates, we are not to examine what conduces to their profit or glory, but what is good for the publick.

His second error is no less gross and mischievous than the first; and that absolute power to which he would exalt the chief magistrate, would be burdensome, and desperately dangerous if he had it. The highest places are always slippery: Men's eyes dazzle when they are carried up to them; and all falls from them are mortal. Few kings or tyrants, says Juvenal, go down to the grave in peace (*Sine caede & sanguine pauci/Descendunt reges, & sicca morte tyranni.* Ju-

## Selections by the American Deist

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ven. Sat.); and he did not imprudently couple them together, because in his time few or no kings were known who were not tyrants.

Dionysius thought no man left a tyranny, till he was drawn out by the heels. But Tacitus says, *Nescit quam grave & intolerandum sit cuncta regendi onus*. Moses could not bear it: Gideon would not accept of any resemblance of it. The moral sense of Jotham's wise parable is eternal: The bramble coveted the power, which the vine, olive and fig tree refused. The worst and basest of men are ambitious of the highest places, which the best and wisest reject; of if some, who may be otherwise well qualified—

—as the fittest to be followed by mankind. If these philosophers and divines deserve credit, Nimrod, Ninus, Pharaoh, and the rest of that accursed crew, did not commit such excesses as were condemned by God, and abhorred by good men; but gaining to themselves the glorious character of his vicegerents, left their practices as a perpetual law to all succeeding generations; whereby the world, and every part of it, would be forever exposed to the violence, cruelty and madness of the most wicked men that it should produce.

But if these opinions comprehend an extravagancy of wickedness and madness, that was not known among men, till some of these wretches presumed to attempt the increase of that corruption under which mankind groans, by adding fuel to the worst of all vices; we may safely return to our propositions, that God having established no such authority as our au-

## Readings in American Deism

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thor fancies, nations are left to the use of their own judgment, in making provision for their own welfare: That there is no lawful magistrate over any of them, but such as they have set up; that in creating them, they do not seek the advantage of their magistrate, but their own: and having found that an absolute power over a people, is a burden which no man can bear; and that no wise or good man ever desired it; from thence conclude, that it is not good for any to have it, nor just for any to affect it, tho it were personally good for himself; because he is not exalted to seek his own good, but that of the publick.

### Section 16

#### The Best Governments of the World Have Been Composed of Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy

Our author's cavils concerning I know not what vulgar opinions that democracies were introduc'd to curb tyranny, deserve no answer; for our question is, whether one form of government be prescribed to us by God and nature, or we are left according to our own understanding, to constitute such as seem best to ourselves.

As for democracy he may say what pleases him of it; and I believe it can suit only with the convenience of a small town, accompanied with such circumstances as are seldom found. But this no way obliges men to run into the other extreme, in as much as the variety of forms between mere democracy and absolute monarchy is almost infinite: And if I should

## Selections by the American Deist

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undertake to say, there never was a good government in the world, that did not consist of the three simple species of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, I think I might make it good.

This at the least is certain, that the government of the Hebrews instituted by God, had a judge, the great Sanhedrin, and general assemblies of the people: Sparta had two kings, a senate of twenty eight chosen men, and the like assemblies: All the Dorian cities had a chief magistrate, a senate, and occasional assemblies: The Ionian, Athens, and others, had an archon, the areopagi; and all judgments concerning matters of the greatest importance, as well as the election of magistrates, were referr'd to the people. Rome in the beginning had a king and a senate, whilst the election of kings, and judgments upon appeals remained in the people; afterwards consuls representing kings, and vested with equal power, a more numerous senate, and more frequent meetings of the people.

Venice has at this day a duke, the senate of the pregadi, and the great assembly of the nobility, which is the whole city, the rest of the inhabitants being only incolae, not cives; and those of the other cities or countries are their subjects, and do not participate of the government. Genoa is governed in like manner: Lucca not unlike to them. Germany is at this day governed by an emperor, the princes or great lords in their several precincts, the cities by their own magistrates, and by general diets, in which the whole power of the nation resides, and where the emperor, princes,

## Readings in American Deism

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nobility, and cities have their places in person, or by their deputies.

All the northern nations, which upon the dissolution of the Roman empire possessed the best provinces that had composed it, were under that form which is usually called the Gothick polity: They had king, lords, commons, diets, assemblies of estates, cortes, and parliaments, in which the sovereign powers of those nations did reside, and by which they were exercised. The like was practised in Hungary, Bohemia, Sweden, Denmark, Poland; and if things are changed in some of these places within few years, they must give better proofs of having gained by the change than are yet seen in the world, before I think myself obliged to change my opinion.

Some nations not liking the name of king, have given such a power as kings enjoy'd in other places to one or more magistrates, either limited to a certain time, or left to be perpetual, as best pleased themselves: Others approving the name, made the dignity purely elective. Some have in their elections principally regarded one family as long as it lasted: Others consider'd nothing but the fitness of the person, and reserved to themselves a liberty of taking where they pleased.

Some have permitted the crown to be hereditary as to its ordinary course; but restrained the power, and instituted officers to inspect the proceedings of kings, and to take care that the laws were not violated: Of this sort were the ephori of Sparta, the maires du palais, and afterwards the constable of France; the

## Selections by the American Deist

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justicia in Aragon; Rijckshofmeister in Denmark; the high steward in England; and in all places such assemblies as are before-mentioned under several names, who had the power of the whole nation. Some have continued long, and it may be always in the same form; others have changed it: Some being incensed against their kings, as the Romans exasperated by the villainies of Tarquin, and the Tuscans by the cruelties of Mezentius, abolished the name of king: Others, as Athens, Sicyon, Argos, Corinth, Thebes, and the Latins, did not stay for such extremities; but set up other governments when they thought it best for themselves, and by this conduct prevented the evils that usually fall upon nations, when their kings degenerate into tyrants, and a nation is brought to enter into a war by which all may be lost, and nothing can be gained which was not their own before.

The Romans took not this salutary course; the mischief was grown up before they perceived, or set themselves against it; and when the effects of pride, avarice, cruelty and lust were grown to such a height, that they could no longer be endured, they could not free themselves without a war: and whereas upon other occasions their victories had brought them increase of strength, territory, and glory; the only reward of their virtue in this was, to be delivered from a plague they had unadvisedly suffered to grow up among them. I confess this was most of all to be esteemed; for if they had been overthrown, their condition under Tarquin would have been more intolerable than if they had fallen under the power of Pyrrhus or Hannibal; and all their following prosperity was the

## Readings in American Deism

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fruit of their recover'd liberty: But it had been much better to have reformed the state after the death of one of their good kings, than to be brought to fight for their lives against that abominable tyrant.

Our author in pursuance of his aversion to all that is good, disapproves this; and wanting reasons to justify his dislike, according to the custom of impostors and cheats, hath recourse to the ugly terms of a back-door, sedition and faction: as if it were not as just for a people to lay aside their kings when they receive nothing but evil, and can rationally hope for no benefit by them, as for others to set them up in expectation of good from them.

But if the truth be examin'd, nothing will be found more orderly than the changes of government, or of the persons and races of those that govern'd, which have been made by many nations. When Pharamond's grandson seemed not to deserve the crown he had worn, the French gave it to Meroveus, who more resembled him in virtue: In process of time when this race also degenerated, they were rejected, and Pepin advanced to the throne; and the most remote in blood of his descendants having often been preferred before the nearest, and bastards before the legitimate issue, they were at last all laid aside; and the crown remains to this day in the family of Hugh Capet, on whom it was bestow'd upon the rejection of Charles of Lorraine.

In like manner the Castilians took Don Sancho surnamed the Brave, second son to Alfonso the Wise, before Alfonso el Desheredado, son of the elder broth-

## Selections by the American Deist

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er Ferdinand. The states of Aragon preferred Martin, brother to John the first, before Mary his daughter married to the Count de Foix, tho females were not excluded from the succession; and the house of Austria now enjoys that crown from Joan daughter to Ferdinand. In that and many other kingdoms, bastards have been advanced before their legitimate brothers. Henry Count of Trastamara, bastard to Alfonso the II king of Castile, received the crown as a reward of the good service he had done to his country against his brother Peter the Cruel, without any regard had to the house of La Cerda descended from Alfonso el Desheredado, which to this day never enjoy'd any greater honour than that of duke de Medina Celi.

Not long after the Portuguese conceiving a dislike of their King Ferdinand, and his daughter married to John king of Castile, rejected her and her uncle by the father's side, and gave the crown to John a knight of Calatrava, and bastard to an uncle of Ferdinand their king. About the beginning of this age the Swedes deposed their King Sigismund for being a papist, and made Charles his uncle king. Divers examples of the like nature in England have been already mentioned. All these transportations of crowns were acts performed by assemblies of the three estates in the several kingdoms, and these crowns are to this day enjoy'd under titles derived from such as were thus brought in by the deposition or rejection of those, who according to descent of blood had better titles than the present possessors. The acts therefore were lawful and good, or they can have no title at all; and they who made them, had a just power so to do.

## Readings in American Deism

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If our author can draw any advantage from the resemblance of regality that he finds in the Roman consuls and Athenian archons, I shall without envy leave him the enjoyment of it; but I am much mistaken if that do not prove my assertion, that those governments were composed of the three simple species: for if the monarchical part was in them, it cannot be denied that the aristocratical was in the senate or areopagi, and the democratical in the people. But he ought to have remembered that if there was something of monarchical in those governments when they are said to have been popular, there was something of aristocratical and democratical in those that were called regal; which justifies my proposition on both sides, and shews that the denomination was taken from the part that prevail'd; and if this were not so, the governments of France, Spain, and Germany might be called democracies, and those of Rome and Athens monarchies, because the people have a part in the one, and an image of monarchy was preserved in the other.

If our author will not allow the cases to be altogether equal, I think he will find no other difference, than that the consuls and archons were regularly made by the votes of the consenting people, and orderly resign'd their power, when the time was expir'd for which it was given; whereas Tarquin, Dionysius, Agathocles, Nabis, Phalaris, Caesar, and almost all his successors, whom he takes for compleat monarchs, came in by violence, fraud, and corruption, by the help of the worst men, by the slaughter of the best, and most commonly (when the method was

## Selections by the American Deist

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once establish'd) by that of his predecessor, who, if our author say true, was the father of his country and his also.

This was the root and foundation of the only government that deserves praise: this is that which stamped the divine character upon Agathocles, Dionysius and Caesar, and that had bestow'd the same upon Manlius, Marius, or Catiline, if they had gain'd the monarchies they affected. But I suppose that such as God has bless'd with better judgment, and a due regard to justice and truth, will say, that all those who have attained to such greatness as destroys all manner of good in the places where they have set up themselves by the most detestable villainies, came in by a *back door*; and that such magistrates as were orderly chosen by a willing people, were the true shepherds who came in by the gate of the sheepfold, and might justly be called the ministers of God, so long as they performed their duty in providing for the good of the nations committed to their charge.

### Section 20

Man's Natural Love to Liberty  
Is Temper'd by Reason  
which Originally Is His Nature.

That our author's book may appear to be a heap of incongruities and contradictions, 'tis not amiss to add to what has already been observed, that having asserted absolute monarchy to be *the only natural government*, he now says, *that the nature of all people is to desire liberty without restraint.*

## Readings in American Deism

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But if monarchy be that power which above all restrains liberty, and subjects all to the will of one; this is as much as to say, that all people naturally desire that which is against nature; and by a wonderful excess of extravagance and folly to assert contrary propositions, that on both sides are equally absurd and false. For as we have already proved that no government is imposed upon men by God or nature, 'tis no less evident, that man being a rational creature, nothing can be universally natural to him, that is not rational.

But this liberty without restraint being inconsistent with any government, and the good which man naturally desires for himself, children and friends, we find no place in the world where the inhabitants do not enter into some kind of society or government to restrain it: and to say that all men desire liberty without restraint, and yet that all do restrain it, is ridiculous. The truth is, man is hereunto led by reason which is his nature.

Everyone sees they cannot well live asunder, nor many together, without some rule to which all must submit. This submission is a restraint of liberty, but could be of no effect as to the good intended, unless it were general; nor general, unless it were natural. When all are born to the same freedom, some will not resign that which is their own, unless others do the like: This general consent of all to resign such a part of their liberty as seems to be for the good of all, is the voice of nature, and the act of men (according to natural reason) seeking their own good: And if all

## Selections by the American Deist

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go not in the same way, according to the same form, 'tis an evident testimony that no one is directed by nature; but as a few or many may join together, and frame smaller or greater societies, so those societies may institute such an order or form of government as best pleases themselves; and if the ends of government are obtained, they all equally follow the voice of nature in constituting them.

Again, if man were by nature so tenacious of his liberty without restraint, he must be rationally so. The creation of absolute monarchies, which entirely extinguishes it, must necessarily be most contrary to it, tho the people were willing; for they thereby abjure their own nature. The usurpation of them can be no less than the most abominable and outrageous violation of the laws of nature that can be imagined: The laws of God must be in the like measure broken; and of all governments, democracy, in which every man's liberty is least restrained, because every man hath an equal part, would certainly prove to be the most just, rational and natural; whereas our author represents it as a perpetual spring of disorder, confusion and vice.

This consequence would be unavoidable, if he said true; but it being my fate often to differ from him, I hope to be excused if I do so in this also, and affirm, that nothing but the plain and certain dictates of reason can be generally applicable to all men as the law of their nature; and they who, according to the best of their understanding, provide for the good of themselves and their posterity, do all equally observe it. He that enquires more exactly into the matter may

## Readings in American Deism

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find, that reason enjoins every man not to arrogate to himself more than he allows to others, nor to retain that liberty which will prove hurtful to him; or to expect that others will suffer themselves to be restrain'd, whilst he, to their prejudice, remains in the exercise of that freedom which nature allows.

He who would be exempted from this common rule, must shew for what reason he should be raised above his brethren; and if he do it not, he is an enemy to them. This is not popularity, but tyranny; and tyrants are said *exuisse hominem*, to throw off the nature of men, because they do unjustly and unreasonably assume to themselves that which agrees not with the frailty of human nature, and set up an interest in themselves contrary to that of their equals, which they ought to defend as their own.

Such as favour them are like to them; and we know of no tyranny that was not set up by the worst, nor of any that have been destroy'd, unless by the best of men. The several tyrannies of Syracuse were introduced by Agathocles, Dionysius, Hieronymus, Hippocrates, Epicides, and others, by the help of lewd, dissolute mercenary villains; and overthrown by Timoleon, Dion, Theodorus and others, whose virtues will be remembered in all ages. These, and others like to them, never sought liberty without restraint, but such as was restrained by laws tending to the publick good; that all might concur in promoting it, and the unruly desires of those who affected power and honours which they did not deserve might be repressed.

## Selections by the American Deist

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The like was seen in Rome: When Brutus, Valerius, and other virtuous citizens had thrown out the lewd Tarquins, they trusted to their own innocence and reputation; and thinking them safe under the protection of the law, contented themselves with such honours as their countrymen thought they deserved. This would not satisfy the dissolute crew that us'd to be companions to the Tarquins. *Sodales adolescentium Tarquiniarum assueti more regio vivere, eam tum aequato jure omnium licentiam quaerentes libertatem aliorum in suam vertisse servitutem conquerebantur. Regem hominem esse, à quo impetres ubi jus, ubi injuria opus sit. Esse gratiae locum, beneficio: & irasci & ignoscere posse. Leges rem surdam esse & inexorabilem, salubriorem inopi quam potenti: nihil laxamenti nec veniae habere, si modum excesseris: periculosum esse in tot humanis erroribus sola innocentia vivere* (T. Liv. l. 2).

I cannot say that either of these sought a liberty without restraint; for the virtuous were willing to be restrained by the law, and the vicious to submit to the will of a man, to gain impunity in offending. But if our author say true, the licentious fury of these lewd young men, who endeavour'd to subvert the constitution of their country, to procure the impunity of their own crimes would have been more natural, that is more reasonable than the orderly proceedings of the most virtuous, who desir'd that the law might be the rule of their actions, which is most absurd.

The like vicious wretches have in all times endeavour'd to put the power into the hands of one

## Readings in American Deism

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man, who might protect them in their villainies, and advance them to exorbitant riches or undeserved honours; whilst the best men trusting in their innocence, and desiring no other riches or preferments, than what they were by their equals thought to deserve, were contented with a due liberty, under the protection of a just law: and I must transcribe the histories of the world, or at least so much of them as concerns the tyrannies that have been set up or cast down, if I should here insert all the proofs that might be given of it.

But I shall come nearer to the point, which is not to compare democracy with monarchy, but a regular mixed government with such an absolute monarchy, as leaves all to the will of that man, woman, or child, who happens to be born in the reigning family, how ill soever they may be qualified. I desire those who are lovers of truth to consider, whether the wisest, best, and bravest of men, are not naturally led to be pleased with a government that protects them from receiving wrong, when they have not the least inclination to do any? Whether they who desire no unjust advantage above their brethren, will not always desire that a people or senate constituted as that of Rome, from the expulsion of Tarquin to the setting up of Caesar, should rather judge of their merit, than Tarquin, Caesar, or his successors? Or whether the lewd or corrupted Praetorian bands, with Macro, Sejanus, Tigellinus, and the like, commanding them, will not ever, like Brutus his sons, abhor the inexorable power of the laws, with the necessity of living only by their innocence, and favour the interest of princes like to those that advanced them?

## Selections by the American Deist

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If this be not sufficient, they may be pleased a little to reflect upon the affairs of our own country, and seriously consider whether H-de, Cl-f-d, F-lm-th, Arl-ng-n and D-nby, could have pretended to the chief places, if the disposal of them had been in a free and well-regulated parliament? Whether they did most resemble Brutus, Publicola, and the rest of the Valerii, the Fabii, Quintii, Cornelii, &c. or Narcissus, Pallas, Icetus, Laco, Vinius, and the like? Whether all men, good and bad, do not favour that state of things, which favours them and such as they are?

Whether Cl-v-l-d, P-rtsm-th, and others of the same trade, have attained to the riches and honours they enjoy by services done to the commonwealth? And what places Chiffinch, F-x and Jenkins, could probably have attained, if our affairs had been regulated as good men desire? Whether the old arts of begging, stealing and bawding, or the new ones of informing and trepanning, thrive best under one man who may be weak or vicious, and is always subject to be circumvented by flatterers, or under the severe scrutinies of a senate or people? In a word, whether they who live by such arts, and know no other, do not always endeavour to advance the government under which they enjoy, or may hope to obtain the highest honours, and abhor that, in which they are exposed to all manner of scorn and punishment?

Which being determined, it will easily appear why the worst men have ever been for absolute monarchy, and the best against it; and which of the two in so doing can be said to desire an unrestrained liberty of doing that which is evil.

