

Second treatise of civil government



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It requires a real man to stand up for what is right. It also requires nerves of steel going against the grain and swimming against the tide. This is especially true when attacking long held beliefs protected by those who are in a position of wealth and power. When John Locke wrote his treatise on government he was not only challenging the status quo but he was questioning a way of life that long existed in the Western world.

This study will look endeavor to understand the John Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government by answering the following questions: 1. What is the history of the document and the events and personalities surrounding its creation? 2. What is the significance of the document? 3. What type of audience did the author have in mind? 4.

What does it reveal about the U. S. or the future United States of America during the time that it was written? 5. Has the importance of this document changed over time? BackgroundThe best, the greatest and even the most brilliant men of every generation could not escape the influence of the external environment, where they were born and grew into adulthood.

In the same way, John Locke could never have escaped the events and ideas that shaped his mind in childhood and in maturity. Wherever he turns he sees a nation bound under an unspoken rule that everyone is subject to an authority figure. In the words of one writer: Central to Locke's England was the notion and presence of superiority. Everyone had a superior. The servant had a master and the child, parents.

The parent too found his or her superior in the magistrate. Magistrates were themselves formed into a hierarchy, rising from the most humble justice of

the peace to the monarch himself. The monarch too had a superior, for above all stood God.[1]AudienceThere is no doubt that John Locke was addressing English society.

He is also writing, conscious of the fact that most of his readers are men and women who are familiar with the Bible. He is a part of a religious society always looking for a way to please God and to live right. This is very evident in the text when he keeps on alluding to Biblical principles. He wanted to appeal to those who are willing to go the difficult path just so they can lead a righteous existence. But most importantly, the author of Locke's caliber is always raring to go to discussion with men of same interests and therefore this treatise is for the intellectuals of his day.

SignificanceSometimes, the importance of a piece of literature, in this case a treatise, can be judged solely by reading the introduction. In Locke's discourse, the introduction part alone packs a wallop. It signifies that the author has so much to give and is not wasting time and if permitted would like to go ahead and discuss the root of the matter. The student of history and political science could not help but appreciate the impact of the following words by Locke, " Firstly. That Adam had not, either by natural right of fatherhood or by positive donation from God, any such authority over his children, nor dominion over the world, as is pretended... That if he had, his heirs yet had no right to it.

"[2] It was like a bombshell placed within the elite English society. Sooner or later the British Empire whose dominion extends from the Western Hemisphere all the way across the globe, will feel the shuddering impact of

Locke's pronouncements. In his opening statements alone Locke is setting on fire centuries of long held tradition and age old beliefs guarded by the nobility and the clergy that there is indeed such a thing as an unbroken line of authority passed down from generation to generation. This is of course a convenient excuse for those who are already so accustomed to having absolute power. It has always been the case that the ruling class can abuse their subjects with impunity and that there is nothing that the common folk can do.

John Locke contends that this kind of ruthless and unjust behavior is unnatural. John Cottigham in his commentary clarifies this by writing that this law concerning the divinely ordained morality teaches that all men are equal and independent and therefore no one should harm another, take away his liberty, or possessions.[3] So how significant is Locke's theory compared to the politically correct ideas of 17th century England? A Biblical passage with regards to absolute power is helpful at this point. In the very popular scene in the Book of Samuel wherein ancient Israel was rejecting the rule of God and instead desired for a human king, God warned them that it was not a great idea.

Speaking through the prophet Samuel he said that the king will claim the following as his rights: a) he will take their sons and make them serve with his chariots; b) some he will assign to become a part of his army while others will be assigned to plow his ground and reap his harvest; c) the king will take their daughters to be cooks and bakers; d) the king will take the best fields and flocks; and finally d) he will make them as his slaves. This prophecy has become real not only for the Israelites but for all nations and groups that has

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adopted a form of one-man rule. The England of John Locke's time is an example of how rulers and powerful monarchs can be so corrupted by power that they will take even those that are not theirs. But for centuries this has been an accepted way of life and no one thought that there can be another way of creating a just society ruled by God. This is where the genius of Locke is made evident. He is actually saying that there is another way.

Locke is saying that man should not suffer indefinitely and that the natural order – even God – is very much mindful of the fact that there are those who are lording it over others. It is a grave injustice and if Locke will have his way he will go about to change the status quo. Concerning the U. S. America was a land that existed before the Englishmen arrived in the early part of the 17th century. It is part of a continent inhabited by various tribes and in some key areas, a significant number of individuals consider America as a source of tradable goods.

It was a continent claimed by many but no single group could assert total dominion over a major portion of the continent. Yet all of that will change when the Pilgrims from England began pouring in eager to build their New England to escape religious schisms, economic hardships, and wars. The Puritans aboard the Mayflower successfully crossed the Atlantic and with their success paved the way for others to come in. The next generation of Pilgrims was already aware of John Locke's ideas.

It is not a stretch to imagine that those who came after 1690 brought a copy with them to the New World and as they say, the rest is history. Test of TimeJohn Locke's proposition was able to transcend his own time. The

Second Treatise of Civil Government was published in distant places, most notably in New England. His ideas created an impact in his native land and aftershocks were felt across the Atlantic. After America's war for independence and the founding fathers began to create a draft for a new constitution an observer could have probably seen the effect that Locke's ideas are having upon the leader's deciding the fate of the newly created Union of sovereign states in America. But John Locke's influence did not end when America experienced release from the British.

His work has simply begun as the words coming from the treatise slowly began to seep into the roots of the newly established nation. In less than a century, America will have to go to war again, this time it is not for the reason that an external force is making life miserable. The Civil War was the result of ideas brewing about long before the first bullet was fired. And still John Locke's influence is in the thick of things adding fuel to the moral debate especially when it comes to the issue of slavery. To understand how the Negroes felt and those who are sympathetic to their cause one has to read an eyewitness account of what goes on in the slave trading business.

Ira Berlin documents it for modern readers. Talking about one particular incident, a Virginian slave owner had the following mindset, " The transaction was a familiar one to the great planter, for Carter owned hundreds of slaves and had inspected many such human cargoes, choosing the most promising from among the weary, frightened men and women who had survived the transatlantic crossing." [4] It does not take much to understand how these people would have felt if they had a chance to read Locke's treatise. Conclusion The transition period between the Medieval Ages

going forward to the Age of Reason can be described as one of the most tumultuous period in the history of the European continent. The schisms and civil wars were inevitable because just like what Edmund Sears Morgan had said, “ From time to time in human history, the course of events challenges men to think about the way they live with one another.”[5] And Morgan added that the passionate debates and the bloody wars were a means to “... carrying one idea to its logical conclusion at the expense of another.

In this way one age slides into the next...”[6]In this transition period a few good became instrumental in the shift, one of them is John Locke, the quintessential genius of a European continent in the throes of modernization. He possess a rare mind that can handle complex information, process it and then when it comes out from him one can now see a intricate pattern, profound. And yet the final product, the Second Treatise of Civil Government, is written in such a way that would allow the average person to appreciate a principle that was once hidden from plain view. Locke’s ideas were nothing short of radical and it came at a time when many are questioning the role of authoritarian figures in their lives. In America it fueled the desire for freedom from the bondage of British rule. And in a century afterwards it was used to strengthen the resolve of those who wanted to end slavery.

The world was never the same again.