

Absolutism

Central Historical Question:

Who should historians treat better, an Absolute ruler who believes without them, men would live “in a state of War,” or one who believes they are doing “God’s work”?

Document #1 The Mandate of Heaven, from the Chinese book *Shu Jing* (The Classic of History) 6th Cent. BCE

When kings cultivated their virtue, there were no calamities from Heaven. But when they did not, Heaven sent down great calamities. The ways of Heaven are not invariable: -- on the good-doer it sends down all blessings, and on the evil-doer it sends down all miseries. If you are not virtuous, be it in large things or in small, it will bring the ruin of your ancestral temple."

Document #2 James I of England Two Speeches 1610

True Law of Free Monarchies

The king is over-lord of the whole land; he is master over every person in that land, with power over the life and death of every one of them. A good king, although he is above the law, will do what he thinks best for the people, not because he has to, but because he wants to.

A speech to parliament

The monarch is the most powerful thing on earth, for kings do God's work on earth and sit on God's throne. To dispute what God may do is blasphemy, and so it is true to dispute with Kings. I do not need to be told my job. I will not let you meddle with the ancient rights I have received from my predecessors, they are ancestral customs. To judge me unworthy of that which my predecessors had and left me would be a terrible thing.

Document #3 Jean Domat On Social Order and Absolute Monarchy 1687

It is necessary to have a leader to unite and rule the society and to maintain the order that benefits the public.

God makes it clear that government arises from His will; and because only He is the natural ruler of men, it is from Him that all those who govern get their power and their authority, and it is God Himself who they represent.

Since government is needed for the public good, and God Himself established it, it is necessary for those who are subject to government, to be submissive and obedient. For otherwise they would resist God Himself.

He who is in charge should hold the place of God. For since God is the only natural ruler of men, no man can have authority over others unless he holds it from the hand of God. Because the power of sovereigns comes from God, it acts as the arm and force of the justice that should be the soul of government.

The first and most essential of all the duties of those who God allows to rule a government is to realize: that it is from God that they hold all their power. Since it is His place they take, they should look to his knowledge and wisdom when making decisions on how to govern. They should make His words the principle of all their conduct and the foundation of all their duties.

We may add as a last duty of the sovereign, which follows from the first and includes all the others, that although his power seems to place him above the law, he should still follow the laws as they may apply to him. He needs to do this to set a good example for his subjects and make them love and respect their laws. In addition, his power does not exempt him from his own responsibilities, and being a good King requires him to prefer the general good of the state over his personal interests. It is a glory for him to look upon the general good as his own.

Document #4 Thomas Hobbes Leviathan 1651

When two men want the same thing, which they cannot both have, they become enemies. They will try to destroy each other. If one has something desirable, others are likely to come and try to take from him not only what he has but also his life, or liberty.

When men live without a government to keep them in control they live in a state of War; every man, against every other.

When men live in a state of war without any security, there is no place for development or progress in Culture, Exploration, Trade, Building, no Knowledge, no Arts, no Books and no Society. Worst of all they live in continual fear, and danger of violent death. The life of man becomes solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

The Passions that make men want peace are Fear of Death and the Desire for a happy life.

The only way to erect a Common Power with a King, who will defend them, and protect their rights, every man should say to every man, *I Authorize and give up my Right of Governing myself to this Man, or to this Assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy Right to him, and Authorize all his Actions in like manner.* By this Authority, the King has use of so much Power and Strength. He may then use the strength of all of them, as he shall think necessary, for their *Peace and Common Defense.*

Consequently none of the King's Subjects, by any pretence of forfeiture, can be freed from his Subjection.