Quotations about Liberty and Power

Each week we post a Quotation about Liberty and Power which is taken from the collection of titles in the Online Library of Liberty. The aim is to explore what some key thinkers have to say about mankind’s struggle for liberty against the individuals and institutions which sought to tax, regulate, control, enslave, conscript, or kill him or her. After 10 years this collection of over 450 quotations provides a valuable resource which shows the diversity and richness of these texts. Each quotation is accompanied by a brief introduction to the author, a short version of the quote, a longer version which places it in context, links to read further about the author, and a brief commentary on the significance of the quote.

The quotations are organized by the following themes:

- Colonies, Slavery & Abolition
- Economics
- Education
- Food & Drink
- Free Trade
- Freedom of Speech
- Law
- Liberty
- Literature & Music
- Money & Banking
- Natural Rights
- Odds & Ends
- Origin of Government
- Parties & Elections
- Philosophy
- Politics & Liberty
- Presidents, Kings, Tyrants, & Despots
- Property Rights
- Religion & Toleration
- Revolution
- Science
- Socialism & Interventionism
- Sport and Liberty
- Taxation
- The State
- War & Peace
- Women’s Rights

We have also created some compilations of Quotations about Liberty and Power on particular topics such as:

- 52 Quotations about War and Peace </pages/52-quotations-about-war-and-peace>
- Quotations about Property Rights </pages/quotations-about-property-rights>
- Quotations for Presidents Day February 20, 2012 </pages/quotations-for-presidents-day-february-20-2012>
- The Twelve Days of Christmas </pages/the-twelve-days-of-christmas>

Please see the complete list for further details.
Tocqueville on the form of despotism the government would assume in democratic America (1840)

The French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) describes what form of tyranny or despotism would come to America: it would be relatively mild, retain some of the “external forms of liberty”, but the people would behave like timid “animals” and the government would act like their shepherd:

“After having thus taken each individual one by one into its powerful hands, and having molded him as it pleases, the sovereign power extends its arms over the entire society; it covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated, minute, and uniform rules, which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot break through to go beyond the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them and directs them; it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it conserves, it extinguishes, it stifles, and finally it reduces each nation to being nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

I have always believed that this sort of servitude, regulated, mild and peaceful, of which I have just done the portrait, could be combined better than we imagine with some of the external forms of liberty, and that it would not be impossible for it to be established in the very shadow of the sovereignty of the people.

(Alexis de Tocqueville)
By: Alexis de Tocqueville
Title: Presidents, Kings, Tyrants, & Despots
See this quote in context.

About this Quotation:

In a number of quotations we have looked at writers who have likened the people to sheep who are protected by the shepherd or “state” in order to better shear them of their fleece or slaughter them for meat. John Milton was quite clear on this analogy and stressed the importance for the state of creating “sheep-like minds” in the heads of the people. Alexis de Tocqueville can be added to this list. In the longer version of the quotation he talks about the importance of “agitation” and “crisis” in creating the precondition for the expansion of state power; that in democratic America the state will create a new form of tyranny, being part despotism, part “tutorship”, and part “paternalism” of the people; that various external forms of liberty will remain but the sheer number of “uniform rules” will reduce the people to a timid and sheep-like status with the state acting like the national shepherd.

More Quotations

<http://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes>