

Principles of Economic Liberty ~ Session 5
Property Rights and Government Wrongs: Wisdom from History on Property Rights

1. [W]henever the Legislators endeavor 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, endeavor 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.
—John Locke—
2. [E]very 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....The great and chief end therefore, of men's uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, is the Preservation of their Property.
—John Locke—
3. The people cannot delegate to government the power to do anything which would be unlawful for them to do themselves.
—John Locke—
4. If “Thou shalt not covet,” and “Thou shalt not steal,” were not commandments of Heaven, they must be made inviolable precepts in every society, before it can be civilized or made free.
—John Adams—
5. The moment the idea is admitted into society that property is not as sacred as the law of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence.
—John Adams—
6. Property is surely a right of mankind as real as liberty.
—John Adams—

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7. Among the natural rights of the colonists are these: First a right to life, secondly to liberty, and thirdly to property; together with the right to defend them in the best manner they can.
—Samuel Adams—
8. I am for doing good to the poor, but I differ in opinion about the means. I think the best way of doing good to the poor is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of it.
—Benjamin Franklin—
9. A right to property is founded in our natural wants, in the means with which we are endowed to satisfy these wants, and the right to what we acquire by those means without violating the similar rights of other sensible beings.
—Thomas Jefferson—
10. The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground.
—Thomas Jefferson—
11. A wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, which shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.
—Thomas Jefferson—
12. To take from one because it is thought that his own industry and that of his father's has acquired too much, in order to spare to others, who, or whose fathers have not exercised equal industry and skill, is to violate arbitrarily the first principle of association-the guarantee to every one of a free exercise of his industry and the fruits acquired by it.
—Thomas Jefferson—

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13. To consider judges as the ultimate arbiters of all constitutional questions is a very dangerous doctrine indeed, and one which would place us under the despotism of an oligarchy.
—Thomas Jefferson—

16. Charity is no part of the legislative duty of the government.
—James Madison—

14. I consider the foundation of the Constitution as laid on this ground that 'all powers not delegated to the United States, by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states or to the people.' To take a single step beyond the boundaries thus specially drawn around the powers of Congress, is to take possession of a boundless field of power not longer susceptible of any definition.
—Thomas Jefferson—

17. Where an excess of power prevails, property of no sort is duly respected. No man is safe in his opinions, his person, his faculties, or his possessions.
—James Madison—

15. The rights of persons, and the rights of property, are the objects, for the protection of which Government was instituted.
—James Madison—

18. With respect to the words "general welfare," I have always regarded them as qualified by the detail of powers connected with them. To take them in a literal and unlimited sense would be a metamorphosis of the Constitution into a character which there is a host of proofs was not contemplated by its creators.
—James Madison—

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19. Wherever the real power in a Government lies, there is the danger of oppression.
—James Madison—
20. Government is instituted to protect property of every sort; as well that which lies in the various rights of individuals, as that which the term particularly expresses. This being the end of government, that alone is a just government which impartially secures to every man whatever is his own.
—James Madison—
21. All men have certain inherent natural rights of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity, among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.
—George Mason—
22. Freedom and Property Rights are inseparable. You can't have one without the other.
—George Washington—
23. Good intentions will always be pleaded, for every assumption of power; but they cannot justify it...It is hardly too strong to say, that the Constitution was made to guard the people against the dangers of good intention, real or pretended.
—Daniel Webster—
24. Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.
—Frederick Douglass—
25. Ultimately property rights and personal rights are the same thing.
—Calvin Coolidge—
26. Next to the right of liberty, the right of property is the most important individual right guaranteed by the Constitution and the one which, united with that of personal liberty, has contributed more to the growth of civilization than any other institution established by the human race.
—William Howard Taft—

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27. Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.
—C. S. Lewis—
28. So great moreover is the regard of the law for private property, that it will not authorize the least violation of it; no, not even for the general good of the whole community.
—William Blackstone—
29. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others.
—Thomas Jefferson—
30. It is precisely those things which belong to 'the people' which have historically been despoiled—wild creatures, the air, and waterways being notable examples. This goes to the heart of why property rights are socially important in the first place. Property rights mean self-interested monitors. No owned creatures are in danger of extinction. No owned forests are in danger of being leveled. No one kills the goose that lays the golden egg when it is his goose.
—Thomas Sowell—
31. It is certainly true that nothing like an equality of property existed: that an inequality would exist as long as liberty existed, and that it would unavoidably result from that very liberty itself.
—Alexander Hamilton—
32. Our wish is that...[there be] maintained that state of property, equal or unequal, which results to every man from his own industry or that of his fathers.
—Thomas Jefferson—
33. If we buy into the notion that somehow property rights are less important, or are in conflict with, human or civil rights, we give the socialists a freer hand to attack our property.
—Walter E. Williams—