



2005 Shaping the World: Conversation on Democracy Thomas Jefferson Talks With George Washington

Algernon Sydney Born: 1622

Birthplace: Penshurst Place, Kent, England

Died: 7-Dec-1683

Location of death: [London, England](#)

Cause of death: [Execution](#)

Gender: Male

Ethnicity: White

Occupation: Politician

Level of fame: Niche

Executive summary: Dangerous English parliamentarian



English politician, second son of Robert, 2nd earl of Leicester, and of Dorothy Percy, daughter of Henry, 9th earl of Northumberland, he was born at Penshurst, Kent, in 1622. As a boy he showed much talent, which was carefully trained under his father's eye. In 1632 with his elder brother Philip he accompanied his father on his mission as ambassador extraordinary to Christian IV of Denmark, whom he saw at Rendsburg. In May 1636 Sidney went with his father to Paris, where he became a general favorite, and from there to Rome. In October 1641 he was given a troop in his father's regiment in Ireland, of which his brother, known as Lord Lisle, was in command. In August 1643 the brothers returned to England. At Chester their horses were taken by the Royalists, whereupon they again put out to sea and landed at Liverpool. Here they were detained by the Parliamentary commissioners, and by them sent up to London for safe custody. Whether this was intended by Sidney or no, it is certain that from this time he ardently attached himself to the Parliamentary cause. On the 10th of May 1644 he was made captain of horse in Manchester's army, under the Eastern Association. He was shortly afterwards made lieutenant-colonel, and charged at the head of his regiment at Marston Moor (2nd July), where he was wounded and rescued with difficulty. On the 2nd of April 1645 he was given the command of a cavalry regiment in [Oliver Cromwell's](#) division of Fairfax's army, was appointed governor of Chichester on 10th May, and in December was returned to parliament for Cardiff. In July 1646 he went to Ireland, where his brother was lord-lieutenant, and was made lieutenant-general of horse in that kingdom and governor of Dublin. Leaving London on 1st of February 1647, Sidney arrived at Cork on the 22nd. He was soon (8th April), however, recalled by a resolution of the House passed through the interest of Lord Inchiquin. On the 7th of May he received the thanks of the House of Commons. On the 13th of October 1648 he was made lieutenant of Dover castle, of which he had previously been appointed governor. He was at this time identified with the Independents as opposed to the Presbyterian party. He was nominated one of the commissioners to try [Charles I](#), but took no part in the trial, retiring to Penshurst until sentence was pronounced. That Sidney approved of the trial, though not of the sentence, there can, however, be little doubt, for in Copenhagen he publicly and vigorously expressed his concurrence. On the 15th of May 1649 he was a member of the committee for settling the succession and for regulating the election of future parliaments. Sidney lost the governorship of Dover, however, in March 1651, in consequence, apparently, of a quarrel with his officers. He then went to the Hague, where he quarrelled with Lord Oxford at play, and a duel was only prevented by their friends. He returned to England in the autumn, and henceforward took an active share in parliamentary work. On the 25th of November Sidney was elected on the council of state and was evidently greatly considered. In the usurpation of Cromwell, however, he utterly refused all concurrence, nor would he leave his place in parliament except by force when Cromwell dispersed it on the 20th of April 1653. He immediately retired to Penshurst, where he was concerned chiefly with family affairs. In 1654 he again went to the Hague, and there became closely acquainted with [Johan de Witt](#). On his return he kept entirely aloof from public affairs, and it is to this period that the *Essay on Love* is ascribed.

Upon the restoration of the Long Parliament, in May 1659, Sidney again took his seat, and was placed on the council of state. He showed himself in this office especially anxious that the military power should be duly subordinated to

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the civil. In June he was appointed one of three commissioners to mediate for a peace between Denmark, supported by Holland, and Sweden. He was probably intended to watch the conduct of his colleague, Admiral Montagu (afterwards 1st earl of Sandwich), who was in command of the Baltic squadron. Of his character we have an interesting notice from Whitelocke, who refused to accompany him on the ground of his "overruling temper and height." Upon the conclusion of the treaty he went to Stockholm as plenipotentiary; and in both capacities he behaved with resolution and address. When the restoration of [Charles II](#) took place Sidney left Sweden, on the 28th of June 1660, bringing with him from the king of Sweden a rich present in testimony of the estimation in which he was held. Sidney went first to Copenhagen, and then, being doubtful of his reception by the English court, settled at Hamburg. From there he wrote a celebrated letter vindicating his conduct, which will be found in the Somers *Tracts*. He shortly afterwards left Hamburg, and passed through Germany by way of Venice to Rome. His stay there, however, was embittered by misunderstandings with his father and consequent straits for money. Five shillings a day, he says, served him and two men very well for meat, drink and firing. He devoted himself to the study of books, birds and trees, and speaks of his natural delight in solitude being largely increased. In 1663 he left Italy, passed through Switzerland, where he visited Ludlow, and came to Brussels in September, where his portrait was painted by van Egmond; it is now at Penshurst. He had thoughts of joining the imperial service, and offered to transport from England a body of the old Commonwealth men; but this was refused by the English court. It is stated that the enmity against him was so great that now, as on other occasions, attempts were made to assassinate him. On the breaking out of the Dutch war, Sidney, who was at the Hague, urged an invasion of England, and shortly afterwards went to Paris, where he offered to raise a rebellion in England on receipt of 100,000 crowns. Unable, however, to come to terms with the French government, he once more went into retirement in 1666, this time to the south of France. In August 1670 he was again in Paris, and Arlington proposed that he should receive a pension from Louis; Charles II agreed, but insisted that Sidney should return to Languedoc. In illustration of his austere principles it is related that, Louis having taken a fancy to a horse belonging to him and insisting on possessing it, Sidney shot the animal, which, he said, "was born a free creature, had served a free man, and should not be mastered by a king of slaves." His father was now very ill, and after much difficulty Sidney obtained leave to come to England in the autumn of 1677. Lord Leicester died in November; and legal business connected with other portions of the succession detained Sidney from returning to France as he had intended. He soon became involved in political intrigue, joining, in general, the country party, and holding close communication with Barillon, the French ambassador. In the beginning of 1679 he stood for Guildford, and was warmly supported by William Penn, with whom he had long been intimate, and to whom he is said (as is now thought, erroneously) to have afforded assistance in drawing up the constitution of Pennsylvania. He was defeated by court influence, and his petition to the House, complaining of an undue return, never came to a decision. His *Letters to Henry Savile*, written at this period, are of great interest. He was in Paris, apparently only for a short while, in November 1679. Into the prosecution of the Popish Plot Sidney threw himself warmly, and was among those who looked to Monmouth, rather than to Orange, to take the place of James in the succession, though he afterwards disclaimed all interest in such a question. He now stood for Bramber (Sussex), again with Penn's support, and a double return was made. He is reported on the 10th of August 1679 as being elected for Amersham (Buckingham) with Sir Roger Hill. When parliament met, however, in October 1680, his election was declared void. But now, under the idea that an alliance between Charles and Orange would be more hostile to English liberty than would the progress of the French arms, he acted with Barillon in influencing members of parliament in this sense, and is twice mentioned as receiving the sum of 500 guineas from the ambassador. Of this there is no actual proof, and it is quite possible that Barillon entered sums in his accounts with Louis which he never paid away. In any case it is to be remembered that Sidney is not charged with receiving money for advocating opinions which he did not enthusiastically hold.

Upon the dissolution of the last of Charles's parliaments the king issued a justificatory declaration. This was at once answered by a paper entitled *A Just and Modest Vindication, etc.*, the first sketch of which is imputed to Sidney. It was then, too, that his most celebrated production, the *Discourses concerning Government*, was concluded, in which he upholds the doctrine of the mutual compact and traverses the High Tory positions from end to end. In especial he vindicates the propriety of resistance to kingly oppression or misrule, upholds the existence of an hereditary nobility interested in their country's good as the firmest barrier against such oppression, and maintains the authority of parliaments. In each point the English constitution, which he ardently admires, is, he says, suffering: the prerogatives of the crown are disproportionately great; the peerage has been degraded by new creations; and parliaments are slighted.

For a long while Sidney kept himself aloof from the duke of Monmouth, to whom he was introduced by Lord Howard. After the death of Shaftesbury, however, in November 1682, he entered into the conferences held between Monmouth, Russell, Essex, Hampden and others. That treasonable talk went on seems certain, but it is probable that

matters went no further. The watchfulness of the court was, however, aroused, and on the discovery of the Rye House Plot, Sidney, who had always been regarded in a vague way as dangerous, was arrested while at dinner on the 26th of June 1683. His papers were carried off, and he was sent at once to the Tower on a charge of high treason. For a considerable while no evidence could be found on which to establish a charge. Jeffreys, however, was made lord chief-justice in September; a jury was packed; and, after consultations between the judge and the crown lawyers, Sidney was brought to listen to the indictment on the 7th of November. The trial began on the 21st of November: Sidney was refused a copy of the indictment, in direct violation of law, and he was refused the assistance of counsel. Hearsay evidence and the testimony of the perjured informer Lord Howard, whom Sidney had been instrumental in introducing to his friends, were first produced. This being insufficient, partial extracts from papers found in Sidney's study, and supposed only to be in his handwriting, in which the lawfulness of resistance to oppression was upheld, were next relied on. He was indicted for "conspiring and compassing the death of the king." Sidney conducted his case throughout with great skill; he pointed especially to the fact that Lord Howard, whose character he easily tore to shreds, was the only witness against him as to treason, whereas the law required two, that the treason was not accurately defined, that no proof had been given that the papers produced were his, and that, even if that were proved, these papers were in no way connected with the charge. Against the determination to secure a conviction, however, his courage, eloquence, coolness and skill were of no avail, and the verdict of "guilty" was given. On the 25th of November Sidney presented a petition to the king, praying for an audience, which, however, under the influence of James and Jeffreys, Charles refused. On the 26th he was brought up for judgment, and again insisted on the illegality of his conviction. Upon hearing his sentence he gave vent to his feelings in a few noble and beautiful words. Jeffreys having suggested that his mind was disordered, he held out his hand and bade the chief-justice feel how calm and steady his pulse was. By the advice of his friends he presented a second petition, offering, if released, to leave the kingdom at once and for ever. The supposed necessity, however, of checking the hopes of Monmouth's partisans caused the king to be inexorable. The last days of Sidney's life were spent in drawing up his *Apology* and in discourse with Independent ministers. He was beheaded on the morning of the 7th of December 1683. His remains were buried at Penshurst.

Father: Robert, 2nd Earl of Leicester

Mother: Dorothy Percy

Brother: Philip

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