

Cato's Letters: Summary



Cato's Letters were published as a series of essays in the 1720s by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. The two British authors used a pseudonym because they were afraid that the things they said would be unpopular with the government or other members of society. The pseudonym they used was Cato, who was a famous Roman philosopher. *Cato's Letters* were widely read in the American colonies, including by many of the Founders, and their arguments on republican government, including more democratic notions of freedom of speech, made them an influential political text in the decades leading to the American Revolution and the drafting of the Constitution.

Applying John Locke's ideas from the previous century to the political issues of the day, its arguments against tyrannical and oppressive government and in support of the liberty and freedom were quoted constantly. The essays deal with various topics ranging from freedom of speech and conscience to the rights possessed by all Englishmen by virtue of their nature as human beings, the benefits of freedom, the restraints on government, the nature of tyranny, and the right of men to resist oppression.

1. *Cato's Letters* argued that the purpose of government is to protect people from being injured by other people.
2. They said that God gave every person the ability to think and reason, so every person has the ability to decide what is best for himself or herself. There is no need for the government to prevent a person from making a bad decision, because if they make a bad decision, they will be punished by the negative consequences of that decision.
3. Therefore, government has no business meddling with the private thoughts and actions of people, if those thoughts and actions do not harm anyone else.
4. They also argued that, when government tries to interfere with a person's private business, government claims that it is doing so for good reasons, such as to protect them or to protect the public interest, but often government officials have more base motives, such as to steal citizen's money.
5. They also argued that freedom of speech is essential for all other liberty, because free speech "is the terror of traitors and oppressors, and a barrier against them." When people live under tyranny, they are afraid to speak honestly, and it is impossible to create great literature, or to achieve wisdom.
6. Therefore, whenever someone tries to deprive people of liberty, they begin by limiting freedom of speech. For example, they punish writers, and burn their books.