

# **Abraham Lincoln**

## **Fragments on Government**

### **July 1, 1854?**

#### **Background**

In this excerpt, Lincoln expresses his political and philosophical views on the role of government.

“The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves- in their separate, and individual capacities.

In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere.

The desirable things which the individuals of a people can not do, or cannot not well do, for themselves, fall into two classes: those which have relations to wrongs, and those which have not. Each of these branches off into an infinite variety of subdivisions.

The first- that in relations to wrongs- embraces all crimes, misdemeanors, and non-performance of contracts. The other embraces all which, in its nature, and without wrong, requires combined action, as public roads and highways, public schools, charities, pauperism, orphanages estates of the deceased, and machinery of government itself.

From this it appears that if all men were just, there still would be some, though not so much, need of government.”

#### **Questions**

- 1) According to Lincoln, what is the purpose of government?
- 2) According to Lincoln, what limits should be placed on government?
- 3) What are some items listed by Lincoln that government should do to help people?
- 4) In our society today, what items would you add that government does or should do to help people?
- 5) In our society today, list any limits that you would place on government.