Religion and the American Revolution

WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS: AMERICA AT 250

Democracy and the American Revolution

Capitalism and the American Revolution

Religion and the American Revolution

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Introduction

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July 4, 2026, will mark the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and, therefore, of the United States of America. But the Declaration declared more than our independence. It declared, on behalf of the new nation, a commitment to a set of principles rooted in a set of premises. And first among those premises was the equality of all human beings, understood as a function of our equal relation to a creator. The Declaration does not offer a comprehensive theology, but this seemingly simple premise nonetheless roots our society's political character deep in the soil of the Judeo-Christian West. It does not commit us to a particular church, but it does entangle us with a religious disposition.

"On my arrival in the United States," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s, "the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention."[1] He was not alone. Despite the prevalence of established churches in the Old World, Europeans have historically perceived the United States as a more religious nation than their home countries. America's civic life has never answered to a specific religious authority, but it has always been marked by a general religious tenor.

The American political project, like the American character, is ultimately indecipherable without recourse to its religious roots. But its relation to those roots has never been a simple matter. There were certainly religious arguments for independence in the age of the founding, but there were also religious arguments against it. Many different religious denominations composed British North America, and they each contributed distinct elements to the amalgam of the new nation, though the tensions between them became internal fissures even among revolutionary

brothers-in-arms. The political personality of the newly independent nation, then, could not help but shape the landscape of American religion in turn.

Our nation cannot be understood without a sense of the part that religion played in its founding. And understanding our nation is precisely the purpose of the American Enterprise Institute's "We Hold These Truths: America at 250" initiative, an ambitious birthday celebration of which this volume forms a part. Over several years leading up to the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we are inviting scholars both within AEI and from other institutions to take up a series of themes important to understanding the American Revolution. These scholars represent a variety of fields and viewpoints, so they will approach each of these themes from various angles. The papers they produce will be published in a series of edited volumes intended to help Americans think more deeply and clearly about our nation's origins, character, and prospects.

Religion and the American Revolution is the third of those books. Its chapters began as papers presented at an AEI conference held in Washington, DC, on September 18, 2024. Other volumes in the series consider the American Revolution in relation to other themes, such as democracy, natural rights, the legacy of slavery, and the Constitution. In each case, our goal is to help reintroduce readers to their nation's history, thereby enabling them to maturely appreciate the reasons for celebrating the extraordinary milestone of its 250th birthday.

In the chapters that follow, five eminent scholars of history, theology, law, and political philosophy consider how we ought to understand the place of religion in the American Revolution—and the influence of the Revolution on American religion.

Michael W. McConnell surveys the breadth of American religious communities in the founding era and the influence of their distinct theologies and institutional forms on the character of American republicanism.

Thomas S. Kidd considers several forms of the religious case for the Revolution and reflects on the ways Americans sought divine sanction and biblical warrant for their political leap of faith.

Jane E. Calvert traces the infamous tension between John Adams and John Dickinson, noting the connections between their respective roots in Quaker and Puritan communities and their approaches to freedom and political authority.

Meir Y. Soloveichik contrasts Adams's religious disposition with that of another rival, Thomas Jefferson. Combining this analysis with a meditation on John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*, he insists on the Judeo-Christian vision's centrality for the self-understanding of the early American republic.

And Vincent Phillip Muñoz views the founding not just as a product of the interplay of reason and revelation but as launching a new understanding of the foundations of political authority, rooted in a recognition of the existence of religious truth and the legitimacy of religious authority.

The breadth of the arguments advanced in these chapters offers a sense of just how broad the influence of religious ideas was on the founding—and just how profoundly those ideas have shaped the nation that declared its independence on that July day a quarter millennium ago.

Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 282.

1

Religion and Republicanism in the American Revolution

MICHAEL W. MCCONNELL

It was a puzzle to the British, and even to some extent many modern historians, why the North American colonists were willing to risk so much—their lives, their fortunes, and their "sacred honor"—for the cause of independence, when their grievances seemed so trifling. The Americans, after all, were probably the freest people on the planet: Their taxes were lower than those of Englishmen in the motherland, they were governed in most respects by legislatures of their own choosing, and they enjoyed greater freedom of speech and religion than their compatriots at home. The most famous answer to this puzzle came from the British statesman Edmund Burke in his 1775 *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*. Burke identified four sociocultural characteristics of the American people that made them unusually zealous for liberty, and hence unusually resistant to heavy-handed monarchical rule. The most striking of these was religion.

According to Burke, the colonists' religion was a "main cause of this free spirit." By this he did not mean that religion in general, whatever its content, promotes a free spirit. He instead meant that the variant of religion most common in America, and especially the Northern colonies where the Tea Party rebellion broke out, was particularly conducive to resistance to authority. "The people are Protestants," he pointed out, "and of that kind which is the most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion." He explained that

> all Protestantism, even the most cold and passive, is a sort of dissent. But the religion most prevalent in our northern colonies

> is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion.[1]

This may sound strange to modern ears. We are accustomed to keeping religious beliefs separate and distinct from philosophies of government and reluctant to ascribe special importance to any particular religious sect. But Burke was not alone in thinking that there is a profound connection between the two. As Alexis de Tocqueville was to write some 50 years later, "Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions."[2] This is partly because of religious teachings about the relations of man to man and partly because of habits formed by church organization.

Religious Establishment and Religious Diversity

In the decades preceding the founding, churches were the principal institutions for the formulation and dissemination of ideas, both oral and written. The leading polemicists on the Loyalist side were almost all Anglican ministers, and many of those supporting the American Revolution were Presbyterian, Congregationalist, or Baptist ministers.

Yes, there were almost 50 newspapers in circulation—most of them weeklies—and historians have long regarded these as the principal forums for spreading revolutionary ideas. But an empirical study of newspaper readership concluded that only about a quarter of the households in Philadelphia in 1773 had access to a newspaper. In most of America, the number of newspaper readers was far lower still. In addition to newspapers, authors frequently shared their ideas through published pamphlets, but these too had a relatively constrained readership.[3]

By contrast, historians estimate that New England churchgoers—and most New Englanders were churchgoers—would hear 15,000 hours of sermons in a lifetime.[4] In addition, traveling evangelists such as

George Whitefield and Samuel Davies reached audiences of thousands. Of course, most of these sermons were not political, but many of them were. Moreover, much of the content in newspapers and pamphlets consisted of reprints or reports of sermons.[5] Some 80 percent of the published political pamphlets surviving from the 1770s are reprints of sermons. It thus makes a difference whether sermons harped on Romans 13 ("Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers") or the fourth chapter of the book of Acts ("Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto [the authorities] more than unto God, judge ye").[6]

The state establishment of religion was therefore not merely a matter of individual or communal liberty of conscience. It also had great structural and institutional significance. Government attempted to control religion for much the same reason it attempted to control the press: to inculcate ideas and opinions favorable to the state among the populace. For this reason, we should think of disestablishment as parallel to freedom of the press, preventing the government from dominating the organs of opinion formation.

At a time when most European nations had a single established church and suppressed most forms of dissent, colonial America was one of the most religiously diverse places on the planet. Virginia and the colonies south of it were settled mostly by economic adventurers with the active support of the British Crown. Each of the Southern colonies recognized the established Church of England, with varying degrees of tolerance for dissenters. Virginia was the most rigid colony, jailing Baptists for preaching without a license up until the eve of the Revolution. Georgia was the most tolerant, partly in the interest of attracting settlers. The Northern colonies of New England were a place of refuge for Puritans and Pilgrims. These pious men and women fled to the New World in search of freedom to worship in accordance with conscience—for themselves, at least. Members of other faiths, such as Baptists, Catholics, and Quakers, were not welcome (except in Rhode Island).

The Dutch colony of New Holland (which would later become the British colony of New York) established the Dutch Reformed Church. But

New York City also attracted religious dissenters of various stripes from all over Europe. These included members of the Sephardic diaspora, who came to New York after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal by way of Amsterdam and Brazil and who formed the first synagogue in America.[7]

Three colonies were established as havens for religious minorities. Maryland was granted to the Calvert family, who created the colony as a place where Catholics could live and worship freely. By 1776, Catholics made up 15 percent of the Maryland population, and there was no Catholic church south of Maryland prior to 1796. Although most American Catholics supported the Revolution, future Chief Justice John Jay, a descendant of Huguenots, attempted to exclude Catholics from eligibility for citizenship at the New York state constitutional convention in 1777. He was successfully opposed by future constitutional framer Gouverneur Morris, also a descendant of Huguenots.

William Penn, whose father had been granted ownership of Pennsylvania, was a devout Quaker and made the colony a welcoming place for that often-persecuted religious minority. In doing so, however, he did not favor Quakers but guaranteed religious freedom for all. As a result, Pennsylvania was an unusually religiously diverse state, with large numbers of Anabaptists, German Lutherans, German Reformed (a German variant of Presbyterianism), and Presbyterians. Frederick Muhlenberg, the first Speaker of the US House of Representatives, was a German-speaking Lutheran pastor from Pennsylvania. There was also a significant Jewish population in Philadelphia.

Rhode Island was founded by Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, who were dissidents from the strict Puritan regime in Boston. From the beginning, Rhode Island had something close to full religious freedom, including for the early Jewish community in Newport.

Religious diversity increased with the First Great Awakening in the middle of the 18th century. This revivalist movement, led by itinerant preachers, was a populist religious outpouring that emphasized personal encounters with the Holy Spirit and accused the more staid and learned clergy of the major denominations of being "hireling priests."[8] A famous

sermon from this period by the Presbyterian revivalist Gilbert Tennent warned of "The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry."[9] This did not sit well with ministers in the settled pulpits. The Great Awakening produced splits in the Reformed Protestant churches between Old Lights and New Lights, swelled the ranks of the Baptists, and birthed the Methodist movement. Its effect was radically democratic and disruptive of established institutions. When Burke spoke of "the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion," he could have been speaking of the Great Awakening.[10]

Although the Church of England was formally established as the state church in every colony south of Pennsylvania and was semi-established in metropolitan New York, it was far from the dominant or largest religious group. By 1775, Anglican churches served only a ninth of the colonial population. They tended to be concentrated in coastal and tidewater areas and scarce in the hinterlands. In order, the largest American denominations at the time of the Revolution were Congregationalists (the successors to the Puritans), Presbyterians, and Baptists. Congregationalists were concentrated in New England, Presbyterians in the middle colonies, and Baptists were dispersed through all the colonies. There were also significant numbers of Quakers and Lutherans, especially in Pennsylvania. Roman Catholics were perhaps 2 percent of the population, concentrated in Maryland, as noted above. There were enough Jews to constitute a congregation in six cities: Charleston, South Carolina; New York; Newport; Philadelphia; Richmond, Virginia; and Savannah, Georgia. With a congregation of 500, the Jewish community in Charleston was by far the largest Jewish community in British North America, though there were no rabbis in the region before 1800.[11]

History and Ecclesiology

"I do not think," Burke claimed in his *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, "that the reason of this averseness in the dissenting churches,

from all that looks like absolute government, is so much to be sought in their religious tenets, as in their history."[12] Certainly, there was ample history to make Protestants wary of governments. Dutch Protestants had suffered violence at the hands of the Spanish in Holland—between 10,000 and 100,000 French Huguenots were killed in a state-sponsored pogrom in 1572—and hundreds of English Protestants were burned at the stake under "Bloody" Queen Mary in the 1550s. However, Catholic monarchs were not alone in fomenting violence against Protestants. English Puritans formed their churches in the teeth of governmental opposition and fled to New England in the 17th century to escape persecution at the hands of the Anglican Stuart monarchy. Puritans who remained in England were jailed and exiled under the Stuarts and fought Charles I in the English Civil War. James II similarly persecuted Scottish Presbyterians in the 1680s when he attempted to force them to accept Crown-appointed bishops.

This history left an indelible mark on the relations between dissenting Protestants and the state. Convinced as they were that their particular form of worship was ordained by God, the fact that it was forbidden by the king and Parliament taught them that the authority of king and Parliament was in opposition to God's will, making rebellion legitimate.

But it was not only historical experience that shaped American political theology. Equally important were doctrine and church organization. The overwhelming majority of Americans (outside of the unchurched, who were numerous) were Protestants of one denomination or another. The most salient differences among denominations had to do with church organization—or what is called ecclesiology. Most of the denominations (with the possible exception of Anglicans) believed that ecclesiology was dictated by Scripture, though they disagreed about what that biblically ordained form of governance should be. In what follows, I will focus on the four largest colonial denominations: Congregational, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Anglican.

By virtue of its foundation and articles of faith, the Anglican Church was committed to royal authority. Henry VIII established the church when he severed ties with the Pope, making the king the "supreme head

of the Church of England."[13] At first, Henry did not intend to alter the church's doctrine or ritual, but the break with Rome coincided with the Protestant Reformation. After Henry's death in 1547, the Anglican Church adopted many of the most prominent Protestant ideas, including the doctrine of justification by faith; a new liturgy in the English language; the rejection of clerical celibacy, indulgences, and transubstantiation; and the proclamation of a new set of articles of faith.

Unlike Reformed Protestantism, Anglican ecclesiology is hierarchical and top-down, more similar in structure to Catholicism than to Congregationalism or Presbyterianism. Under the 1559 Act of Supremacy, the monarch is the "supreme governor" of the church. He or she has the authority to appoint the church's high officials (though now this authority, like all royal prerogatives, must be exercised on the advice of the prime minister) and correct "all manner of errors, heresies, schisms, abuses, offenses, contempts, and enormities" that might arise in the church.[14] No one may be ordained as a minister unless he (or, since 1993, she) swears an oath of allegiance to the monarch as head of both church and state. Before the Revolution, American ministers had to travel to London to take this oath before the bishop of London, who had ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the churches in the colonies. In Virginia and some other parts of North America, where there was no bishop to exercise discipline, Anglican ministers were effectively under the thumb of the parish vestry, an elected office typically held by members of the local gentry. George Washington was a vestryman in his Anglican church near Mount Vernon.

Descended from the Puritan Church, the Congregational Church is governed at the local level by the congregation. In its early years, only those who gave evidence of experiencing saving grace could be full members. Eventually all the male members of the congregation could vote and had power to elect the minister of their choice. In theory, this could be a clergyman of any denomination, but in practice this almost always meant a Protestant of Puritan persuasion. The minister was often a man of education and great personal influence. Congregationalists emphasized the importance of a learned ministry—hence the centrality of Harvard and

Yale in New England society. But in theory, the minister's role was solely to preach and lead worship; governance of the church was in the hands of elders elected by the congregation. Each local congregation governed itself, with no higher colonial, state, or national authority.

As fellow Reformed Protestants, Presbyterians resembled Congregationalists in many ways, but their governance was distinctive. Each congregation elected a board of lay members, called ruling elders, who governed the church. This was called the session. The minister, whose formal title was (and still is) teaching elder, was responsible for preaching the gospel, but church discipline was the role of the session. Each session sent lay members, plus clergy, to a regional body called the synod and ultimately to a national general assembly. No single person headed the church, and there were no bishops. The Presbyterian Church was nonetheless connectional, and local congregations could be reprimanded and corrected by appeal to the ascending tiers of judicatories. In effect, the general assembly served the governance function of national bishops or archbishops, but the power flowed up from the congregations rather than down from the top.

The Dutch Reformed Church was virtually identical in structure to the Presbyterian, except that until 1754 its equivalent of the general assembly, the classis, was located in Amsterdam. Descendants of the Huguenots, the Protestants of France who were persecuted after the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes, easily assimilated into the Anglophone Protestant culture, most often as Anglicans or Presbyterians.

Baptists were yet more individualistic. Membership in congregations was fluid, and anyone could serve as a preacher without need for formal theological training. Many were unpaid laymen. Sometimes even women and African Americans were preachers. Like the Congregationalists—but even more so—each congregation governed itself and chose and ordained its own ministers. The most distinctive feature of Baptist theology was that only believers could be baptized, which meant persons of sufficient age to make a convincing profession of faith. This may seem a trivial difference, but the adherence to believers' baptism was an affirmation of the

ultimate authority of each person over himself or herself. Baptists believe that we are not born into faith or religious society and must instead choose for ourselves. The belief that true religion is a matter only between each person and the Creator made the Baptists the fiercest opponents of established religion and advocates of what they called "soul liberty."

Why does all this ecclesiology matter? Tocqueville, the most perceptive analyst of American political institutions, wrote that "every religion is to be found in juxtaposition to a political opinion which is connected with it by affinity."[15] Some religions are monarchical, some aristocratic or oligarchic, some republican, and some democratic. Some lend themselves to demagogic tyranny or coercive imposition, and some are disruptive of authority.

Anglicanism, by its structure, accustomed its adherents to monarchical rule. If you believe that in the most important things in life, authority flows from the top down—and if you believe, in particular, that religious authority is vested in a hereditary monarchy—you will tend to believe that political authority is of a similar nature. The colonial American variant of Anglicanism tended more toward oligarchy than monarchy. Because distance across the ocean precluded effective governance by a royally appointed bishop, authority in American parishes tended to devolve toward the local vestry, which was dominated by the landed elite. That, too, had its political effect.

As an early historian of the American Revolution wrote in 1794, "The ministers of New England being mostly congregationalist, are from that circumstance, in a professional way more attached and habituated to the principles of liberty than if they had spiritual superiors to lord it over them."[16] The absence of a hierarchy in religious matters reinforced the idea of an absence of hierarchy in political matters. James I tried to impose bishops on the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland because, in his words, "No bishop, no king."[17] It is likely James was less concerned with church organization as a matter of abstract ecclesiology than because of its implications for civil government. People who formed their own churches, governed their own churches, and elected their own pastors found it

natural to form their own governments, govern their own polities, and elect their own leaders.

Political scientist Donald Lutz has observed that the earliest colonists patterned their civic charters and compacts on church charters they had formed in the mother country.[18] This is not to say that adherents to hierarchical faiths are unable to be good republican citizens—Tocqueville reported that Catholics in America were "the most republican and the most democratic class in the United States."[19] But it helps to explain why Protestants, especially Reformed Protestants, were inclined toward republican government.

The distinctive feature of Congregationalism as a branch of Reformed Protestantism is its adherence to localized democracy, based on the individual congregation. It is not a coincidence that the characteristic New England civil institution was the town meeting.[20] In view of the value Congregationalists placed on a learned clergy, it is perhaps more precise to say that Congregationalism in practice tended toward a localized form of democracy dominated by an educated leadership class, which often coincided with wealth and birth.

Presbyterian governance is similar to Congregationalism in that authority comes from the people, but it has an important difference. Presbyterian congregations are not isolated; they are subject to supervision and control by higher authorities. The congregation elects the session, and the session sends delegates to the synod and ultimately to the general assembly, which is the highest authority. It is a federal system. After receiving an education at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), the leading intellectual center of Presbyterian thought in America, is it any surprise that the otherwise deistic James Madison became the greatest designer and defender of a constitution he dubbed "partly federal, partly national?"[21] Founding-era Presbyterianism thus was as republican in its tendency as Congregationalism, but it was disposed toward a federal rather than a localist or nationalist structure.

The Baptist impulse was more libertarian and more anarchic. If a Baptist did not like the way his church was going, he would leave and

join another—a marked contrast from religious traditions such as Catholicism, where the faithful often have a lifelong attachment to the church as an institution, whatever they may think of its teachings. Baptists thus tended to be the most antiauthoritarian religious movement in the new republic. Along with their fellow spirits among the New Lights of the First Great Awakening, Baptists were a force for popular democracy more than cautious republicanism.

Political Theology

Then as now, churches generally had a political theology—a doctrine regarding the responsibilities of man to man and the proper organization of society. Reformed Protestants had a series of teachings that, although formulated for reasons other than politics, had profound implications for politics and pointed strongly in the direction of republican government. The Church of England, by contrast, had (and still has) an explicit article of faith affirming the authority of the British monarch over both church and state.

Article 37 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England, finalized in 1571, addresses the authority of "Civil Magistrates." It declares that the king or queen has "the chief power in this Realm of England, and other his Dominions," and goes on to say that the monarchs have the "prerogative . . . that they should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evil-doers."[22] This article of faith makes the British monarchy not just a preferred form of governance but one that is divinely ordained.

The first provision of the 1604 canons of the Church of England, which were carried over into the Anglican colonies, required ministers at least four times a year to deliver sermons teaching that the king "is the highest power under God." Amusingly, the canons specified that this adjuration was to be delivered "purely and sincerely, without any colour or

dissimulation."[23] Because all Anglican ministers had to take an oath of loyalty to the Crown, an American minister who supported the Patriot cause would be in violation of his sacred oath. During the Revolution, half of them resigned their pulpits, out of either conviction or fear of their Patriot parishioners. The most public Tory voices were typically found in places like New York, where they enjoyed the protection of British troops.

The Book of Common Prayer was a particular bone of contention. It prescribed prayers for the king as part of the regular liturgy, asking God "to be [the king's] defender and keeper, giving him victory over all his enemies."[24] That posed an obvious problem after the Declaration of Independence. The Anglican Church in Philadelphia replaced these words with the more patriotic sentiment "that it may please [God] to endue the Congress of the United States & all others in Authority, legislative, executive, & judicial with grace, wisdom & understanding, to execute Justice and to maintain Truth."[25] In Maryland, one of the states with the highest percentage of Patriots, the church was in confusion, not daring to continue the old prayers but believing itself without authority to change the liturgy. The church turned to the revolutionary state government in 1776, which replaced the words of the prayer with a blessing on the "honorable Congress."[26] Such are the travails of an established church in revolutionary times. At that point, the Anglican Church in Maryland had ceased to receive public financial support but still understood itself as under government control regarding its manner of worship.

All in all, these provisions of church doctrine tied the Church of England to the Loyalist cause. A New Jersey Loyalist minister in 1774 wrote, "The principles of submission and obedience to lawful authority are as inseparable from a sound, genuine member of the Church of England, as any religious principle whatsoever."[27]

The foundational text for Reformed Protestant political theology is John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first published (in Latin) in 1537. Calvin taught that individuals have a religious duty to obey their rulers up to the limits of Christian conscience—but not further. The flip side

is that individuals have a duty to God to disobey political authorities when they command actions in violation of Scripture or forbid actions commanded by Scripture. In his chapter on Christian liberty, Calvin wrote that Christians must "voluntarily obey the will of God"—with an emphasis on "voluntarily." Calvin believed that righteous acts avail us nothing if they are done under compulsion. It follows that, to obey the will of God, men must be free.[28]

Calvin's theological descendants thus understood resistance to arbitrary government—not obedience or submission—to be the religious duty of a Christian. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin emblazoned this belief in their design for the first seal of the United States, which proclaimed "Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God."[29] Governments that oppress their people and deny their freedom to follow their consciences in obedience to God are acting contrary to the will of God.

In sermon after sermon, revolutionary preachers gave a political twist to this passage from the book of Galatians: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."[30] They also interpreted Romans 13 as requiring obedience to civil rulers only when those rulers were using their power for the ends specified in that passage: to reward good and punish evil. Congregationalist minister Jonathan Mayhew's 1750 *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*, which was one of the most widely circulated and influential political sermons of the era, gave the following interpretation of Romans 13:

> If it be our duty, for example, to obey our king, merely for this reason, that he rules for the public welfare, (which is the only argument the apostle makes use of) it follows, by a parity of reason, that when he turns tyrant, and makes his subjects his prey to devour and to destroy, instead of his charge to defend and cherish, we are bound to throw off our allegiance to him, and to resist; and that according to the tenor of the apostle's argument in this passage.[31]

The biblical passage most often cited in support of obedience to civil rulers was thus turned on its head.

In his chapter on civil goverment, Calvin argued that every regime has lesser magistrates (counsellors, legislators, judges, and nobility), who have the duty to protect the people. When the higher magistrates, including the king, become abusive and tyrannical, these lesser magistrates have the obligation to organize and lead the resistance. As historian John Witte explains,

> The power to resist and remove tyrants, however, lay not directly with the people, but with their representatives, the lower magistrates, who were constitutionally called to organize and direct the people in orderly resistance to tyrants—in all out warfare and revolution if needed.[32]

Thus, when American colonial legislatures remonstrated against British abuses and their delegates met in formal continental congresses to raise armies in defense of American liberties, they were behaving in good Calvinist fashion.

The First Great Awakening further inclined Americans toward resistance to authority. One of the principal themes of the revivalist preaching of the Great Awakening was to undermine the common people's deference to an educated clergy—and by secular analogy to authorities of all sorts. The Great Awakening was, in essence, a populist uprising. Historians generally agree that the political effect was democratizing, and thus it built hostility to the British establishment.[33]

Support for Independence

Whether because of history, ecclesiology, or doctrine, denominational differences manifested in clerical attitudes toward the American Revolution. A meticulous study of the views of every Anglican minister in the colonies

found that only 27 percent supported the Revolution—with most of the supporters being from Virginia. Of 55 Anglican clergy north of Pennsylvania, only three supported the Revolution. Virtually every important pamphlet published in support of the Loyalist position came from the pen of an Anglican priest.[34]

By contrast, Reformed Protestant clergy supported the Revolution almost unanimously. Many observers at the time credited (or blamed) Reformed Protestantism for the Revolution. Joseph Galloway, an early supporter of the American cause who later became a Tory and fled the country, wrote that the Revolution was caused by Presbyterians and Congregationalists, whose "principles of religion and polity [were] equally averse to those of the established Church and Government."[35] Another Loyalist blamed the Revolution on the "black Regiment"—referring to the austere black robes worn by Calvinist ministers.[36] King George III reportedly called the Revolution a "Presbyterian Rebellion."[37]

It is more difficult to get reliable numbers on the political allegiances of the people in the pews. The split between Patriots and Tories ran along regional, ethnic, economic, and religious lines. Historian Paul Johnson, however, reports that Anglicans were "predominantly loyalist, except in Virginia."[38] New York, one of the most heavily Anglican states, was also one of the most Loyalist. There is no reason to doubt that members of the three largest denominations—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists—followed their clergy in favoring the Patriot cause. Catholics and Jews, both miniscule in numbers, were overwhelmingly supportive of the Revolution; Quakers and Methodists less so. The Dutch and German Reformed and the German Lutherans were divided.

These differences had a major impact on religious freedom in America. The two denominations that held the status of established church in the colonies prior to independence were the Congregationalists in New England (on a localized basis) and the Church of England throughout the South and in parts of New York. In every state where the Church of England was the established church, it was stripped of that status during the Revolution, for the obvious reason that it made no sense to support

a church that was committed to the divinely ordained authority of the monarchy. Establishment never returned to those parts of the country. By contrast, the Congregational Church emerged from the Revolution with increased prestige. John Adams commented that "we might as soon expect a change in the solar system, as to expect [that Massachusetts] would give up their establishment."[39] In fact, the establishment of religion survived in Massachusetts for only a couple more generations, being abandoned in 1833.

The Principle of Energy

It is sometimes assumed that the American Revolution was a product of the secular Enlightenment, and thus of a turn away from religion. Burke knew better. Religion was "always a principle of energy," according to Burke, and it was in "no way worn out or impaired" in North America. Moreover, "The religion most prevalent in our northern colonies" was committed to the principal of resistance to arbitrary authority.[40]

Sometimes it is the testimony of critics that makes the most persuasive case. David Hume, who abhorred religious fervor, wrote that the Puritans were "actuated by that zeal which belongs to innovators, and by the courage which enthusiasm inspires." For Hume, "It was to this sect, whose principles appear so frivolous and habits so ridiculous, that the English owe the whole freedom of their constitution."[41] It was even more so in revolutionary America.

Notes

1. L. DuPont Syle, ed., *Burke's Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies (March 22, 1775)* (Leach, Shewell & Sanborn, 1895), 23–24.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Bantam Dell, 2000), 2:355.

3. See Jordan Taylor, "Circulation, Subscription, and Circumscription: The Pennsylvania Journal and Newspaper Readership in Revolutionary Philadelphia,"

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 146, no. 2 (2022): 144, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/861289; Joseph M. Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing the News, 1763–1789* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 33 (circulation), 143 (number of newspapers each year between 1760 and 1790), 172 (weekly publication). On pamphlets, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Belknap Press, 1992), 1–4; and Donald S. Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 141–42.

4. See Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 3, 3n4. For a collection of sermons, see John Wingate Thornton, ed., *The Pulpit of the American Revolution* (Gould and Lincoln, 1860).

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6. Rom. 13:1 (AV); and Acts 4:19 (AV).

7. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Yale University Press, 2005).

8. English Quakers popularized this term in the 17th century. See Ambrose Rigge, *To All the Hireling Priests in England* (Thomas Simmons, 1659).

9. Archibald Alexander, *Sermons of the Log College* (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 81.

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14. Henry Gee and William John Hardy, eds., *Documents Illustrative of English Church History* (Macmillan, 1896), 442–58.

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16. William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the United States of America, Including an Account of the Late War; and of the Thirteen Colonies, from Their Origin to That Period.* (Charles Dilly and James Buckland, 1788), 1:273–74, quoted in Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, xii.

17. William Barlow, *The Summe and Substance of the Conference: Which It Pleased His Excellent Majestie to Have with the Lords, Bishops, and Other of His Clergie at Hampton Court, January 14, 1603* (1604) (Bye and Law, 1804), 62.

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37. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 173. See also King George III, July 1, 1774, quoted by Thomas Hutchinson, *Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson*, P. O. Hutchinson, ed. (Houghton, Mifflin, 1884; AMS Reprint, 1973), 1:168; and Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg (Yale University Press, 1990), 28:461–62.

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2

Divine Sanction and the American Case for Revolution

THOMAS S. KIDD

Americans today may forget just how difficult it was for Patriots to justify independence in 1775 and 1776. Popular resistance against taxes was one thing. Destruction of British property, as in the Boston Tea Party of 1773, took matters to another level. Military conflict, beginning at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, amplified the stakes even more. But finally rejecting monarchical authority and declaring legal separation from the British was an audacious step for which Americans could point to few historical parallels. Complaints about unfair tax and judicial policies were suitable rationales for framing petitions, but shedding British and American blood demanded more. A cause of the American Revolution's magnitude required divine sanction.

War typically draws out appeals to divine backing, especially in nations with deep roots in the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, such as the United States and Britain. Sometimes these appeals can seem manipulative or insincere; sometimes they seem entirely earnest. Few Americans, for example, would quibble with Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's D-Day message in 1944 when he called the effort to liberate Europe from Nazi tyranny a "Great Crusade" and asked all Americans to pray for God's blessing on this "great and noble undertaking."[1] Between 1775 and 1776, appeals to divine sanction similarly emerged when Americans made key decisions about resistance, war, and independence. Written during the most critical 16 months of the Patriot journey from resistance to independence, Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and the Declaration

of Independence all contained notable appeals to God's blessing and biblical warrant.

These three texts illustrate essential points about the way Americans justified resistance and independence, reflecting the prominent role religion played in American colonial culture. The first point is the most straightforward: Appeals to divine sanction were omnipresent in 1775 and 1776. The frequency of these appeals to God's blessing reminds us of a second point: that the Bible—or at least theological language—was central to the rhetorical repertoire of American revolutionaries, including Patriot leaders who did not hold devout Christian beliefs. Of the primary authors considered here, only Henry was a traditional Christian. Finally, theological and natural law justifications for liberty gave some Americans resources to make reformist arguments on questions such as religious liberty and slavery.[2]

Above All Earthly Kings

Henry delivered his "Liberty or Death" speech on March 23, 1775, to the Second Virginia Convention assembled at St. John's Church in Richmond. The convention had reached an impasse about next steps in the burgeoning crisis with Britain over tax policy and parliamentary power. Should Virginians continue to petition British officials for relief or begin defensive preparations in anticipation of war? Henry responded with the "Liberty or Death" oration, long regarded as the most scintillating speech of the revolutionary era.

Henry's insistence on military preparation was quite radical in March 1775. For feeble colonial militias to take up arms against Britain, one of the world's most powerful militaries, seemed nearly suicidal to many observers. Facing such objections, he insisted that the "God of hosts" would be on America's side if they summoned the courage to fight.[3]

Henry not only claimed divine sanction for military preparation but did so in a short speech—just over 1,200 words—packed with a surprising

amount of biblical content. In fact, "Liberty or Death" almost seems more like a brief revival sermon than a cerebral discourse on political principles. Given Henry's background, this is not surprising. His family was formally Anglican, the typical denomination for Virginia landowners and political leaders. But his mother, Sarah, was an evangelical Christian, having joined Samuel Davies's Presbyterian church in Hanover, Virginia.

Sarah relished the revival preaching of the First Great Awakening, which was still stirring among Virginians during Henry's teenage years. Family tradition records that Sarah would take young Patrick to hear Davies's riveting sermons, and Henry recalled that Davies was not just the best preacher he ever heard but the "greatest orator" he knew in any vocation.[4] It is also possible that Henry read Davies's religious justification of the resort to arms during the Seven Years' War, which Davies characterized as the righteous defense of British Protestant liberties against the tyranny of Catholic France.[5] This background helps explain Henry's seamless channeling of Scripture in "Liberty or Death."

Henry's deep familiarity with Scripture was not unusual at the time, of course. Even skeptical and deistic founders such as Benjamin Franklin were thoroughly conversant with the text of the King James Bible—the most popular translation of the Bible in the American colonies since the mid-17th century.[6] Franklin, who grew up in a Puritan family in Boston, probably knew the Bible better than any other major founder despite his profession of deism as an adult.[7] The surviving version of Henry's speech suggests that his audience—the leaders of Virginia's Patriot movement—were sufficiently familiar with Scripture that Henry did not need to supply chapter and verse references for them to recognize biblical phrases in the speech.

Most of the identifiable scriptural references in "Liberty or Death" came from the Hebrew Bible's prophet Jeremiah. For example, Henry warned that if Virginians failed to realize the gravity of the threat against their liberty, they could be like "those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not." This was a citation most directly of Jeremiah 5:21, though the Bible repeatedly uses such imagery. Other references are just faint

echoes, maybe ones in which Henry himself may not have consciously cited the Bible. For example, in the same sentence with the eyes and ears allusion, Henry speaks of "the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation," likely alluding to Hebrews 6:9 and its phrase "things that accompany salvation." God attended to eternal salvation, but here Henry wanted Virginians to wake up, perceive their crisis, and attend to their temporal salvation.

What purposes did these biblical references serve? One was that the Bible—and Jeremiah in particular—simply provided much of the oration's structure. The King James Bible is arguably the most rhetorically influential text in the English language's history, and Henry's speech was a case study for how the Bible could serve as a toolbox for effective oratory. The staccato biblical images came one after another. Referencing Jeremiah 18:22, Henry warned that British assurances of goodwill would become a "snare to your feet." Next, he warned the American colonists not to allow themselves to be "betrayed with a kiss," a reference to Jesus's arrest in the Gospels that would have been familiar to virtually any English-speaking person who spent time in church.

But these biblical phrases did not just provide structure. They provided an appeal to divine sanction, implying that Henry himself was serving as a prophet-like figure in the revolutionary crisis. This was a role he had embraced since the first days of the crisis, when he denounced the Stamp Act as a freshman legislator in Virginia in 1765.

Henry, as was his tendency, raised the stakes on divine sanction in "Liberty or Death." Alluding to Hebrews 8:1, he insisted that if he failed to call for military preparation, it would amount to an "act of disloyalty toward the Majesty of Heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings." He insisted that when all realistic political options for relief were exhausted, "an appeal to arms and to the God of hosts is all that is left us!" Henry assumed that God would be on their side in this "holy cause of liberty" and that divine aid would trump their manifestly weak military capacities. "We are not weak," he insisted, "if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power."

The "God of nature" would appear as "Nature and . . . Nature's God" in the Declaration, but here the phrase meant that God would turn America's earthly, natural advantages (a mobilized population defending its homeland against an invading army) into a formula for victory. "We shall not fight our battles alone," Henry continued. "There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations, and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us." Here he promised that if Americans manifested the courage to fight, God would providentially prompt other nations—most obviously the French, given their antipathy to Britain—to ally with the fledgling American nation.

Again, Henry was positioning himself in the mode of a biblical prophet—an audacious stance but one he believed he had earned by 10 years of unrelenting service to the Patriot cause. He suggested in the speech's opening that it would be easier to remain silent and dodge the awful responsibility of calling the people to arms. But that would be shirking his God-given duty. In one of his last references to Jeremiah, Chapter 6, verse 14, Henry warned that "gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace—but there is no peace." He predicted, correctly, that soon Virginians would receive word of war breaking out in Massachusetts. "Why stand we here idle?" he asked, echoing Matthew 20:6. "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God!" Finally, he declared in a cadence reminiscent of Israel's leader Joshua, "I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" (The phrase "liberty or death" was likely recalling a line from Joseph Addison's classical tragedy *Cato*.)[8]

The speech persuaded the convention, which adopted Henry's call to prepare the militia to resist the British army's incursions. Some critics regarded Henry as a holier-than-thou demagogue, however. One said that his speech was "infamously insolent" and that Henry had become "so infatuated, that he goes about . . . praying and preaching amongst the common people."[9] Unlike Paine and Jefferson, though, there is no reason to question the consistency of Henry's appeal to divine sanction with his personal religious beliefs. Henry was a lifelong committed Anglican,

which complemented the influences from his mother, Samuel Davies, and evangelical Presbyterianism.

If anything, his Christian convictions became more overt later in life, prompted by his concern regarding the publication of Paine's aggressively skeptical book *The Age of Reason* in the mid-1790s. As Henry told his daughter in 1796, Paine's writings reminded him that "the religion of Christ has from its first appearance in the world, been attacked in vain by all the wits, philosophers, and wise ones" of the present age.[10] The broad resonance of biblical appeals was part of why Christian critics such as Henry found it so appalling that the disbelieving Paine eventually turned his rhetorical guns against the Bible itself.

The Law Is King

Paine's *Common Sense* appeared at the beginning of 1776. The war with Britain had already been going for nine months, but Americans still found it excruciating to contemplate a final break with Britain. Paine had only come to America in late December 1774, but before leaving England he made a crucial connection with Franklin, who was serving as a colonial agent in London. Franklin supplied him with a letter of introduction to business and publishing contacts in Philadelphia. Working with Franklin and the Patriot leader Benjamin Rush, Paine began drafting *Common Sense* in fall 1775, framing an argument for independence.

The provocative result succeeded beyond all expectations, with some 50,000–75,000 copies of the pamphlet in circulation by the end of 1776. Many people heard excerpts from *Common Sense* read out loud in meetings at taverns and coffeehouses. America in 1776 was a profoundly oral and communal culture, so Paine crafted *Common Sense* to sound compelling when read publicly, like a sermon would. In this oral quality, it had obvious similarities to Henry's "Liberty or Death."[11]

Appeals to divine sanction also came fast and furious in *Common Sense*, which is ironic since Paine later became known as the most radical skeptic

among the founders, clinching this reputation with the publication of *The Age of Reason*. But like his mentor Franklin, Paine knew the Bible well and was prepared to use it to great political effect. In one of the pamphlet's most moving passages, Paine suggested that in place of a king, the Word of God would rule in America:

> But where, say some, is the King of America? I'll tell you, friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the Royal Brute of Great Britain. Yet that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honours, let a day be solemnly set apart for proclaiming the Charter; let it be brought forth placed on the Divine Law, the Word of God; let a crown be placed thereon, by which the world may know, that so far as we approve of monarchy, that in America THE LAW IS KING.

Skeptic or not, Paine knew just how to speak the language of Bible-believing American Protestants. Paine's family background was in Quakerism and Anglicanism, and he seems to have had some exposure to Methodist preaching before he left England.[12]

Unlike the Declaration of Independence, *Common Sense* did not just use generic theological language about God and the Bible. And unlike Henry's reliance on religious references and allusions in "Liberty or Death," *Common Sense* actually engaged in detailed biblical commentary. Paine particularly focused on 1 Samuel 8 from the Old Testament. In this passage, the elders of Israel asked the aging prophet Samuel to "make us a king to judge us like all the nations." God's response was indignant. "They have rejected me, that I should not reign over them," the Lord told Samuel. Samuel warned the Israelites that a king would abuse them and even place burdensome taxes on them! But the Israelites persisted, demanding that they be granted a king "that we also may be like all the nations." Paine concluded from this text "that the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government." This fact was "true," Paine insisted, "or scripture is false."[13]

Given that Paine was trying to delegitimize monarchy, his application of this passage may seem somewhat obvious. But 1 Samuel 8 was not an oft-discussed text—for either religious or political purposes—in Anglo-American publications of the 1700s. It was occasionally interpreted along Paine's radical, anti-monarchical lines a century prior, in the heady days of the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution. The Hebraic republican argument suggested that God originally meant for Israel to be a republic, not a monarchy. Such a biblical contention against kingly rule largely fell silent between the 1690s and 1776, however. It is always difficult to interpret silence, but it may be that ministers and theologians realized the 1 Samuel 8 text potentially held radical republican implications—the precise quality that attracted Paine and a few anti-monarchical predecessors to it.[14]

Paine's phrase "the law is king" echoed the Scottish divine Samuel Rutherford's *Lex, Rex* (1644). Rutherford argued against the absolute authority of monarchs, since even a king was subject to divine law. Rutherford's work was regarded as subversive by the administration of King Charles II, who assumed the throne in 1660 after the republican tumult of the English Civil War. Only Rutherford's illness and death in 1661 kept him from facing trial for sedition. Rutherford's work suggested that a tyrannical king was a curse, not a blessing. If monarchs were absolute sovereigns, Rutherford concluded, then a people praying, "Lord give us a king" as they did in 1 Samuel 8 might as well pray, "Make us slaves, Lord; take our liberty and power from us, and give a power unlimited and absolute to one man." *Lex, Rex* was part of the long tradition of Anglo-American resistance literature that influenced the American Patriots.[15]

Likely a more direct influence on Paine's biblical argument against monarchy was the great English poet and philosopher John Milton. Milton went beyond Rutherford when he concluded in the 1650s that a republic was preferable over a monarchy. Like Paine, he drew on 1 Samuel 8 to argue that he had biblical warrant for his view despite the Bible's repeated positive (though hardly perfect) portrayals of divinely sanctioned monarchs such as King David and King Solomon. Milton wrote

that God's reaction to the Israelites' request in 1 Samuel 8 showed that God was unwilling to give them a king, demonstrating how "wide was the disjunction of God from a king." Discussing monarchy in 1651's *A Defence of the People of England*, Milton further insisted that 1 Samuel 8 showed God "dislikes it, discommends it, [and] finds fault with it."[16]

Although the precise influence of Milton on Paine is uncertain, Paine apparently did claim Milton as his chief authority for interpreting 1 Samuel 8. John Adams, our main source on Paine's debt to Milton, wrote repeatedly about Paine's argument against monarchy from 1 Samuel 8. Adams was a Unitarian Congregationalist, preferring a rationalist, ethics-focused version of Christianity over the traditional Calvinism of prerevolutionary Massachusetts. But like Henry, Adams deplored Paine's radical skepticism and anticlericalism. Adams told Rush in 1809 that he had confronted Paine in 1776 about

> his grave arguments from the Old Testament to prove that Monarchy was unlawfull in the Sight of God. "Do you Seriously believe, Paine," said I, "in that pious Doctrine of yours?" This put him in good humour and he laught out. "The Old Testament!" Said he, "I don't believe in the Old Testament. I have had thoughts of publishing my Sentiments of it: but upon deliberation I have concluded to put that off till the latter part of Life."[17]

While we do not know the extent to which Paine doubted Christianity by 1776, if Adams's recollection was accurate, Paine was referring to arguments against the Bible he would publish in *The Age of Reason* 20 years later.

In his autobiography, Adams offered a slightly different version of this alleged conversation with Paine. Here Adams said that when *Common Sense* came out, he liked its argument for independence but regarded Paine's sentiments about monarchy and 1 Samuel 8 as "ridiculous." "Whether they proceeded from honest ignorance or foolish Superstition

on one hand, or from will-full Sophistry and knavish Hypocrisy on the other I know not," he mused. Again, when Adams confronted Paine, "He laughed, and said he had taken his Ideas in that part from Milton: and then expressed a Contempt of the Old Testament and indeed of the Bible at large." Without evidence to corroborate Adams's recollections, it would be a stretch to conclude that Paine's use of 1 Samuel 8 was wholly manipulative and insincere. But like Jefferson's invocation of God in the Declaration, surely Paine's use of the Hebrew Bible was "tactical," as historian J. C. D. Clark puts it.[18]

Paine and Jefferson both knew that they were speaking to an American public that held the Bible in high regard. Most readers would have been familiar with scriptural accounts such as what transpired in 1 Samuel 8. Or, if they did not recall its precise details, they would have instantly recognized the passage as an important comment on monarchy, simply because it was in the Bible. Whatever Paine's and Jefferson's own doubts about the sacred text, they were prepared to use the Bible—or at least rhetoric about God—to make the case for independence. But unlike Jefferson's invocation of equality by common creation, Paine's biblical argument was controversial. Paine's gloss on 1 Samuel 8 was one that few had ever advanced in print, and it seems likely that it drew partly on familiarity with Milton and his exotic interpretation of Israel's request for a king.

Paine's redeployment of the Hebraic republican argument about God's opposition to monarchy was not universally accepted, even among Patriots—as seen in Adams's reaction to it. But Paine knew that if Americans were going to reject monarchy, it would help to provide a biblical warrant for doing so. Some Patriot clergy, such as Peter Whitney of Massachusetts, wholly embraced Paine's argument. Whitney quoted *Common Sense* in his 1777 sermon American Independence Vindicated, arguing that before the events of 1 Samuel 8, Israel had no earthly king and that "it was held sinful to acknowledge any being under that title but the Lord of hosts."[19]

Nature's God

If Paine inaugurated the public debate about independence, the Declaration of Independence represented America's leap into the great unknown of separation from Britain. To ensure that the document's message resonated with American colonists, Jefferson and the Continental Congress urgently needed an appeal to divine warrant for independence in the Declaration. They sought to put the argument in theological terms that were both broad and bracing. They certainly did not want to set off a sectarian controversy over what the Declaration said about God, but they also did not want to make the language so generic it lacked persuasive power.

It is instructive to compare the Declaration of Independence to the comparatively vague Virginia Declaration of Rights, penned by George Mason (a pluralistically minded Anglican) and adopted by the Virginia Convention on June 12, 1776. The Virginia Declaration reaches the same conclusion about human equality as the Declaration of Independence, but in more philosophical language. It asserts that "all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights." While Jefferson and Mason may have meant effectively the same thing, Jefferson's language of equality by common creation was more powerful: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."[20]

Jefferson did not employ theological language because of his own religious devotion. Though reared in the Anglican Church, Jefferson seems to have begun to doubt basic Christian doctrine by the mid-1770s. His skepticism became more pronounced by the late 1780s, when he compared the Bible's miracles to similar episodes from Roman mythology. In a letter to Henry Lee written in 1825, Jefferson explained that the Declaration was not seeking "originality of principle or sentiment." Instead, "it was intended to be an expression of the american mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonising sentiments of the day."[21]

Unlike Paine, Jefferson was not looking to say anything that would cause exasperation, at least not about the appeal to divine sanction. The mere argument for independence was controversial enough. The "proper tone" would assert that independence was justified because God had given Americans rights that no person—including King George III—could justly violate. Jefferson focused on "harmonizing sentiments," or at least principles, that could unify those who agreed that independence was necessary despite the gravity of the decision.

In the same 1825 letter to Lee, Jefferson cited "Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney etc." as some of the sources that influenced the Declaration. Algernon Sidney, an English republican writer from the time of the English Civil War, is a surprisingly illuminating source for understanding the Declaration's religious appeals. In *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698), a book that Jefferson owned, Sidney made an argument similar to Paine's about 1 Samuel 8 and God's opposition to monarchy. Sidney may have also shaped Jefferson's resonant phrase about equality by creation. Sidney had written that "nothing can be more evident, than that if many [men] had been created, they had been all equal." But "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator" was both more theologically specific and more powerful than what Mason or Sidney had written on the matter.[22]

The Declaration also opened with an appeal to divine sanction in its assertion that there was a "separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" entitle a people pursuing independence. Here Jefferson was suggesting that there was a created order, which justified a periodic return to man's state of nature, a time before the creation of government in which humans were "separate and equal." Many have understandably focused on the deistic implications of the phrase "Nature and . . . Nature's God." Jefferson surely had doubts about a meticulously providential, personal God who was involved in the everyday affairs of men. But Jefferson's God was discoverable by reason and the order of creation. To Jefferson, people stood equal before God because they each came equally from him as the Creator. Jefferson had many reservations

about Christian doctrine, but his views about the created order were fairly conventional for the time.[23]

The Continental Congress believed that Jefferson's draft of the Declaration was headed in the right direction. Jefferson had grounded the case for equality and rights in common creation by God and the God-given natural order. But the document dropped the topic of divine approval when Jefferson addressed the long "history of repeated injuries and usurpations" of the British against the American colonists. Members of Congress wanted to return to the theme of God's sanction at the end. Consequent edits concluded the document with its most direct comment on God's judgment when delegates appealed to "the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions." Finally, the delegates professed "a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence" in their endeavors.

The Sanction of Heaven

Americans who supported the Patriot cause applauded the Declaration and its appeals to God's blessing. In the face of the trials that were to come with revolution, a writer in the Massachusetts *Essex Journal* asked, "Who, under the propitious smiles of Divine Providence, so signally favorable, so animatingly engaging, can now be timorous?" Critics in Britain and Loyalists in America understandably scoffed at the Declaration's religious rhetoric, however. The author of the popular English tract *The Rights of Great Britain Asserted Against the Claims of America* (1776) argued that "the law of God and of Nature is on the side," not of the American colonists, but of Britain, just as God's laws supported a generous "parent, against an undutiful child." If "necessary correction" should render the ingrate "incapable of future offence, he has only his own obstinacy and folly to blame." In other words, Americans should not have been surprised when the wrath of the British military providentially disciplined them for their foolish behavior.[24]

Maybe the most intriguing responses to the appeals to divine sanction came from reformers who sympathized with the American cause but worried that moral inconsistency or hypocrisy might invite God's judgment on the Patriots. The two most common concerns along these lines were religious liberty and slavery. Baptists, for example, had argued since the outset of the revolutionary crisis that the Patriots' complaints against unjust taxes would fall flat if they continued to impose religious taxes on Christian dissenters to support the colonies' established churches.

As of 1776, most of the colonies had some form of an establishment of religion, meaning a state-sponsored Christian denomination. In New England, the Congregationalist Church was established; elsewhere it was the Anglican Church. Most Anglo-American writers conceded that liberty of conscience was the most fundamental of all liberties, yet a number of colonies—especially Virginia—aggressively persecuted dissenting ministers on the eve of the Revolution. Dozens of Baptist preachers landed in jail in the late 1760s and 1770s. How could the Patriots sincerely tout their commitment to liberty when they denied dissenters the freedom to worship God in accordance with the dictates of conscience?[25]

Isaac Backus, a leading Baptist pastor in Massachusetts, argued that maintaining state churches amid the crisis with Britain made Americans vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy. In *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty* (1773), he chastised Patriot leaders for calling for American unity while denying religious freedom to those who did not attend established churches:

> How can such a union be expected so long as that dearest of rights, equal liberty of conscience, is not allowed? Yea, how can any reasonably expect that HE who has the hearts of kings in his hand, will turn the heart of our earthly sovereign to hear the pleas for liberty, of those who will not hear the cries of their fellow-subjects, under their oppressions?[26]

Would God listen to their prayers and change the heart of George III if they were depriving fellow Americans of their most precious freedoms?

Backus approached the cousins John and Samuel Adams about the possibility of Massachusetts dropping its Congregationalist establishment, but they scoffed at his request. An annoyed Samuel Adams suggested that the arguments against the Massachusetts establishment "came from enthusiasts who made a merit of suffering persecution."[27] (In the 1770s, "enthusiast" meant a religious fanatic.) Dissenters got some concessions in favor of religious liberty in Massachusetts during the revolutionary era, and the worst instances of persecution largely ended. Yet Massachusetts was still the last state in America to abandon established churches in 1833.

Similar reformist arguments came from critics of slavery: How could Patriots claim to be concerned about liberty when they denied freedom of self-determination to enslaved people? Christian groups such as the Quakers had registered moral concerns about chattel slavery for decades, but the revolutionary crisis generated fresh attacks.[28] Perhaps the most trenchant antislavery argument came from the militiaman and former indentured servant Lemuel Haynes of Massachusetts. Haynes would receive Congregationalist ordination in 1785, becoming the first black ordained pastor in the United States. He wrote the unpublished manuscript "Liberty Further Extended" in 1776 as a direct response to the Declaration of Independence and its appeal to divine sanction for American liberty. "Liberty Further Extended" conspicuously quoted the Declaration's statement that "all men are created equal" on the title page, leaving no doubt that Haynes was responding to the Declaration's notion of equality by God's common creation.[29]

As his manuscript's title suggests, Haynes further extended the American case for liberty by taking equality by creation to its logical conclusion. "Liberty is a jewel which was handed down to man from the cabinet of heaven," Haynes wrote. "It proceeded from the supreme legislature of the universe, so it is [God] which hath a sole right to take away." Blacks and whites were of the same human species, and all were created in the same way by God. Their desire for liberty was a commonly shared principle and a "law of nature." Therefore, "liberty is equally as precious to a Black man, as it is to a white one, and bondage equally as intolerable to the one as it is

to the other." A petition by slaves to the Massachusetts legislature made virtually the same argument in 1777. They contended in rough dialect that they "have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Grat Parent of the Unavers hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind." The appeal to divine approval could have unexpected applications when put in the hands of those with qualms about slavery. A state court ruling effectively ended slavery in Massachusetts in 1781, but it would prove difficult to abolish slavery in the states farther south, where the institution was more central to the economy.[30]

Patriot appeals to divine sanction were not conversation stoppers. Both pervasive and provocative, they were as likely to generate debate as consensus. They elicited indignation among Loyalists, who believed that Patriots were masking a basically immoral revolution with the veneer of divine approval. Certain appeals to God and the Bible, such as Paine's use of 1 Samuel 8, struck even some Patriot leaders as extreme and ludicrous. One's response to the appeal to divine sanction did not simply depend on which side of the Revolution one stood, although partisan alignments obviously made a difference. But it would be difficult to imagine Americans in 1776—or in virtually any American war—not making at least generic appeals to God's blessing. The human and material sacrifices of war demand higher justifications than an unwillingness to pay taxes.

Appeals to divine sanction and prayers for protection kept appearing throughout the Revolutionary War. They conveyed a hope not only that God would bless the Patriot cause but that America would be the sort of nation God might bless. This is why the Continental Congress, following older precedents set by Anglo-American legislatures, called for national days of prayer and thanksgiving. Many revolutionaries also believed that cocky presumption of God's favor was a surefire way to earn disfavor and that national sins would bring down God's wrath. Thus in 1779, Congress called for days of national fasting and "humiliation," that God might

> avert those impending calamities which we have too well deserved: that he will grant us his grace to repent of our sins,

> and amend our lives, according to his holy word: that he will continue that wonderful protection which hath led us through the paths of danger and distress . . . [and] that he will give wisdom to our councils, firmness to our resolutions, and victory to our arms.[31]

Such prayers appeared regularly throughout the Revolution, both in formal legislative proclamations and in the private devotions of American citizens. But the need for God's blessing seemed especially acute in 1775 and 1776, when Patriots led Americans into war and independence. Those audacious steps left many Americans looking for biblical warrant and hoping for divine support.

Notes

1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, statement to Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force, 1944, US National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/general-eisenhowers-order-of-the-day.

2. The literature on the Bible and the Revolution is extensive and of exceptionally high quality. See, for example, James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2013); and Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

3. All references to the speech come from "Patrick Henry—Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death," Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patrick.asp. The original text of "Liberty or Death" did not survive. What we do have is a re-creation of the speech by William Wirt from 1816, based on interviews with people who were there. Scholars debate the reliability of Wirt's re-creation, but I regard Wirt's text as reliable enough as an approximation of what Henry said. See Thomas S. Kidd, *Patrick Henry: First Among Patriots* (Basic Books, 2011), 98; and Charles L. Cohen, "The 'Liberty or Death' Speech: A Note on Religion and Revolutionary Rhetoric," *William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1981): 702–4.

4. Kidd, *Patrick Henry*, 30; Cohen, "The 'Liberty or Death' Speech," 712; and Jon Kukla, *Patrick Henry: Champion of Liberty* (Simon & Schuster, 2017), 23.

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7. Thomas S. Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life of a Founding Father* (Yale University Press, 2017), 5–6.

8. Joseph Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy* (1701), 45.

9. James Parker to Charles Stewart, April 6, 1775, quoted in Robert Douthat Meade, *Patrick Henry: Practical Revolutionary* (J. B. Lippincott Company, 1969), 42–43.

10. Patrick Henry to Elizabeth Aylett, August 20, 1796, Virginia Historical Society.

11. Yuval Levin, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* (Basic Books, 2014), 16–17; and Vaughn Scribner, *Inn Civility: Urban Taverns and Early American Civil Society* (New York University Press, 2019), 167.

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13. Thomas P. Slaughter, ed., Common Sense *and Related Writings* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 82.

14. Nathan R. Perl-Rosenthal, "The 'Divine Right of Republics': Hebraic Republicanism and the Debate over Kingless Government in Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (July 2009): 536, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40467522. The English writer Algernon Sidney also employed a Hebraic republican argument against monarchy in Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 2nd ed. (J. Darby, 1704).

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16. Elizabeth Tuttle, "Biblical Reference in the Political Pamphlets of the Levellers and Milton, 1638–1654," in *Milton and Republicanism*, eds. David Armitage et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78; John Milton, *The Works of John Milton* (W. Innys, 1753), 1:659; and John Milton, *A Defence of the People of England* (n.p., 1695), 24. *A Defence* was originally published in Latin in 1651.

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3

"Puritan" John Adams and "Quaker" John Dickinson: A Reassessment

JANE E. CALVERT

On July 1, 1776, John Dickinson and John Adams gave speeches on whether to declare independence from Great Britain. Dickinson, who had led the resistance for over a decade, was opposed; Adams, in only his third year of active participation, was in favor. After Adams prevailed, both went on to have illustrious careers building the American nation. Dickinson, more than Adams, continued to be celebrated as an icon of American liberty. But for centuries, historians of the Revolution have unintentionally overlooked, actively neglected, or enthusiastically denigrated Dickinson due in large part to an uncritical acceptance of Adams's version of events leading to that debate. Beginning with George Bancroft's history in the 1840s through David McCullough's 2001 *John Adams* and beyond, Dickinson has been portrayed as an effeminate, disloyal foil to Adams's manly patriot.[1] A clear view of the historical record, however, shows that Dickinson, much more than Adams, made the Revolution—and indeed the founding—not only possible but successful.

The root of the profound differences between the two founders—usually overlooked by scholars—was their respective religious traditions. As a Massachusetts Congregationalist, Adams was a descendant of the Puritans who had settled there in 1630. By contrast, Dickinson's family was Quaker, and he himself was a "fellow traveler" with the Religious Society of Friends, as Quakers were formally known. These two religious traditions had conflicted in both old England and New England since Quakerism arose in the 1650s. Considering that the bulk of the political theory of the early modern era derived from theology of one stripe or

another, that two men whose thinking derived from these opposing faiths would clash with one another is unsurprising.

This chapter will reassess Adams's and Dickinson's respective roles in the founding. Beginning with brief biographies and a primer on their theological traditions, it will focus on particularly the clash between Adams and Dickinson in the year before independence was declared and on the religious foundations of the tensions between them.

Two Sorts of Revolutionaries

For all that Adams and Dickinson had in common, their respect for one another, if not their friendship, should have been assured. They were both intellectuals, both dedicated and successful lawyers with a strong sense of justice. They were principled, patriotic, and committed to securing rights and liberties for their country. They were both men of deep feeling and great energy. As two of the workhorses of Congress, they were eloquent and persuasive writers and orators on the American cause. Both came to believe fervently in republicanism—one form of it or another—as a structure of government and as an ideology.

But there the similarities ended. Dickinson and Adams were diametrically opposed in personality, political style, and the underlying theology of their positions. These differences resulted in contributions to the American cause that, while frequently in tension, were equally necessary for the success of the American Revolution.

Adams was born on October 30, 1735, to a farming family in Quincy, Massachusetts. As a boy, he disliked school and initially wanted to be a farmer like his father, with whom he was close. Although he lived with his mother until he married at age 29, and she lived until he was in his 60s, he wrote hardly a word about her.[2] The elder Adams intended his son to be a minister and sent him to Harvard for training. Unconvinced that religion was his path, Adams instead taught school until he realized he enjoyed neither the work nor the children. In 1756, he went into the law, effectively

learning it on his own without much help from his master and beginning practice in 1758. After a couple of years of struggle, his practice flourished.

Although he was not initially interested in Abigail Smith, the daughter of a prominent Congregationalist minister, they eventually married in 1764 and had eight children, three boys and five girls, two of whom died young. Abigail became his best friend and intellectual partner, frequently leading her husband to more extreme and aggressive political views.[3] Adams's first public service came in 1770, when he was elected to the Massachusetts legislature. He ceased practicing law in 1777, when he became a United States diplomat.

Adams was bright and curious with a sharp wit, but he was perennially restless and frequently unhappy, given to complaining to those around him. Like many young men of his age, he desired fame, which he chased even as he questioned his own worthiness and distrusted the ambition that drove him. He was insecure, thin-skinned, and inclined to be hotheaded and combative when he felt slighted, which was often. His emotional outbursts caused some to question his ability to do his work and even his emotional stability, a charge that serious scholars have dismissed. Nevertheless, he tended to be overly candid and impulsive. Though not actually an "idiosyncratic volcano," as Adams biographer R. B. Bernstein put it, Adams was frequently his own worst enemy, alienating those around him and creating adversaries where there had been none.[4]

Dickinson was born November 13, 1732, in Maryland. His parents were Quakers, and he was raised in the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania, specifically in the three lower Pennsylvania counties that are now Delaware.[5] He was close with both of his parents, but especially his mother, who instilled in him a love of religion and literature. His father, a wealthy landowner and judge, provided him with the best legal training in the British Empire, including an apprenticeship with a former king's attorney in Philadelphia from 1750 through 1753 and training at London's Inns of Court from 1753 to 1757. Once a barrister, Dickinson returned to America and began practicing in Philadelphia in 1757, quickly rising to the top of his profession. He was elected to the legislature of Pennsylvania's Lower

Counties in 1759, and, after becoming speaker of that house, he was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1762, where he served on and off through 1776.

In 1770, he married Mary "Polly" Norris, from the most prominent Quaker political family in the province. He had loved her for years, but she was a devout Quaker, and Dickinson's unwillingness to become a member of the Society of Friends caused her to break their engagement for a time. They had five children, of whom two girls survived. Polly discussed politics with her husband and joined him in philanthropic ventures. Dickinson continued practicing law until shortly before his death in 1808.

Cheerful, even-tempered, and gracious, Dickinson made friends easily among people of all ranks. While deeply introspective, he was not introverted. He interrogated himself vigorously toward self-improvement but possessed enough native confidence to excel in public speaking and practical politics. By temperament and training, Dickinson was a careful and methodical thinker. As much as he loved learning for its own sake, he also loved teaching others—children, apprentices, and jurors—which, if he forgot himself, could result in his coming across as a pedant. Likewise, whereas many saw Dickinson's commitment to his sense of virtue and principle as admirable, even his friends found it maddening when he stubbornly refused to compromise on matters contrary to his conscience. Uncharitable colleagues mistook his inflexibility for timidity or self-interest. Like Adams, Dickinson too thought he wanted fame—that is, until he actually got it.[6]

Adams's Puritan ancestors were a severe people, militant in their religion and intolerant of dissenters. They had not come to America for religious liberty, as lore has it. Rather, they came to create a Puritan dictatorship that would serve as a model society to the world—a "citty upon a hill," as Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop put it.[7] Their theology, the doctrine of predestination, held that God had chosen a select few for salvation and the rest would be condemned to hell. God covenanted, or contracted, with these elect men and women on the

understanding that if they followed his law, they would be saved. Although no one could know definitively whether he was saved or damned, there might be signs one way or another. Those showing signs of damnation—including anyone who was different in belief or behavior—must be removed or the entire community would be damned. Thus, dissenters, criminals, and misfits were banished or executed.[8]

Puritan political theory worked in the same way. God covenanted with his elect people and their king, who would all be saved if they upheld the covenant by obeying God's law. If the king disobeyed God, the people had the duty and the right to overthrow him and replace him with a godly king. The Puritans had put this theory of revolution into practice during the English Civil War when they executed Charles I in 1649. Royalists responded with their own theory, called the divine right of kings, which held that because the king was God's representative on earth, he could do no wrong. If his people felt oppressed, they had the right only to petition him and plead for relief. After the monarchy was restored in 1660, these two positions respectively solidified as Whig and Tory, radical and conservative, advocates for the people and advocates for the king. In the years preceding the 1688 Glorious Revolution, John Locke refuted divine right theory and explained the Puritan theory of revolution, now secularized, in his *Two Treatises of Government*.[9]

Americans, generally more radical than their counterparts in Britain, tended to be Whigs, although there were certainly Tories in the colonies as well. Thus, most Americans believed in the theory of revolution as the solution to an oppressive government. Like Tories, they began with humble petitioning. If that didn't work, they moved on to rioting. If still unsuccessful in securing the desired change, they advanced to the overthrow of the government. Those living in the New England colonies, as the direct descendants of Puritans, still lived the covenant theology in their daily lives through their personal and political relationships. It is no surprise, then, that the people of New England were the first to riot and the first to see revolution as the only solution to their troubles with the British government.

But Whiggism and Toryism were not the only two political theories in early modern Britain. During the 1660s in England, another idea of resistance that eventually replaced the theory of divine right monarchy and of revolution arose. It was Quaker constitutionalism. The Religious Society of Friends, called Quakers by their enemies for their trembling during worship, were dissenters who drew their theology from a unique amalgam of English Puritanism and continental Anabaptism. They were theologically exacting like the Puritans, but they were pacifists like the Anabaptists. They were also the most persecuted religious dissenters in England by the government and ordinary subjects alike. Their core theological belief, called the doctrine of the Light Within, was that all individuals could experience God's light within their consciences. In other words, all people—male or female, white or black, rich or poor, Christian or infidel—could be saved, and all were equal to the degree they experienced God's light. All people were also allowed to preach.

These unorthodox beliefs, combined with their aggressive proselytizing, caused Quakers to be beaten, tortured, imprisoned, and otherwise brutalized. But importantly, because God decreed that man must not destroy his creations, which meant other men but also the divinely ordained civil unity (or constitution), Quakers were not allowed to resist with violence. When the government violated God's law by oppressing the people, they too had a duty and right to resist, but only with peaceful means. Quakers thus pioneered the theory and practice of civil disobedience—that is, the public, nonviolent breaking of unjust laws with the intent to raise public awareness and create change from the bottom up. Early Quakers, men and women alike, stood on principle and died willingly as martyrs for the cause of religious liberty.[10]

Although Quakers were successful in helping to secure religious toleration in England and its realms, their nonviolent methods did not immediately catch on. At first, they were accused of sedition, despite the fact that Quaker methods were respectful of the established order and intended to preserve the unity of the polity—that is, the sanctity of the constitution. Then, when it became clear they were not seeking the overthrow of

the government, they were ridiculed. The attitude of many Englishmen toward Quakers' pacifism can be summarized by a passage from Locke's *Second Treatise*:

> He that shall oppose an Assault . . . without a Sword in his hand . . . will quickly be at an end of his Resistance, and will find such a defence serve only to draw on himself the worse usage. This is [a] ridiculous a way of resisting.[11]

Such "imaginary Resistance" would result in the dissenter's being "pounded and cuffed into a jelly."[12] This truism held for the self-defense of a people against their tyrannical government as much as it did for individual self-defense against a robber. Englishmen found nonviolence laughable. Yet the Quakers' methods allowed them to resist oppression actively much sooner than their Whig counterparts, at the first sign of danger.

Although Dickinson was not a Quaker and Adams was not a Puritan, they were nearly perfect exemplars of the interwoven theological and political theories that dominated in their respective colonies. With this context, we can better comprehend the actions of Dickinson and Adams in the Revolution.

Beginnings of Resistance

Before the First Continental Congress met in the fall of 1774, Adams played virtually no part in the resistance to Britain. It was rather his cousin Samuel who led Massachusetts's efforts. The single contribution John Adams made was to draft the instructions of his town, Braintree, to its representatives in the Massachusetts Assembly relative to the 1765 Stamp Act. The drafting committee removed his more strident passages.[13] Although he wrote publicly twice during this period, only a comedic newspaper article related directly to British legislation, and neither piece was published widely or known to be his until well after 1776.[14] Strikingly,

Bernstein observes that before the First Congress, Adams "did not yet grasp that the controversy with Britain was American, not just a matter for Massachusetts or for New England."[15]

Dickinson's position was entirely different. Since he had studied law in London in his early 20s, he had identified primarily as an American, rather than as a Briton or a Pennsylvanian, and prided himself on holding American values that separated him from other Britons in England.[16] Further, although he felt loyal to the king, he suspected executive power and the motives of ministers who would do anything "for the Smiles of their Prince."[17] During the earliest years of his law practice, his sense that the Crown was infringing on American merchants' right of free trade prompted him to write an essay on the topic. Keeping an eye on Parliament, he was ready when the Stamp Act passed, writing the Pennsylvania Assembly's resolves against it and then attending the Stamp Act Congress in New York, where he was the lead draftsman on the Petition to the King and the Declaration of Rights and Resolves. From the beginning of the contest, he understood it as being all of America—including at least the North American colonies, and possibly the West Indian islands and Canada—against Great Britain.

As the Stamp Act Congress met in fall 1765, the rioting that had begun in New England spread down the coast to New York and Philadelphia. Adams and Dickinson were alarmed by the riots, but only Dickinson acted. He noticed that everything written to that point against British measures was theoretical and addressed mostly to elite audiences. Because there was nothing of a practical nature addressed to ordinary Americans, he sought to provide guidance in a broadside essay he named for its intended audience: "Friends and Countrymen."

Short and clear, the broadside explained that the Stamp Act was dangerous because it would set a precedent for more taxation if obeyed. So he recommended resisting, but not by evasion or violence. Rather, he advised the Quaker method of civil disobedience, "to proceed in all Business as usual, without taking the least Notice of the Stamp Act." By this means, the American people would virtually repeal the act, which would

compel Parliament to repeal it actually. The broadside resonated with colonists from Pennsylvania's Lower Counties up to Connecticut, who eagerly accepted the advice. Dickinson wrote two other longer pamphlets against the Stamp Act, one in December 1765 on political economy and one in 1766 explaining his prescription for resistance to the Committee of Correspondence in Barbados.[18]

When the next attack on American rights came in the form of the Townshend Acts in 1767, most Americans hardly noticed. Those who had protested so violently against the Stamp Act were silent regarding these new affronts. In December, Dickinson therefore began publishing a series of 12 essays in colonial newspapers titled *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies*. He had several aims: first, to explain the offending legislation and why it was a violation of the colonists' rights; second, to rouse Americans to resist peacefully; and third, to encourage them to unite *as Americans*.

The Farmer, as Dickinson became known, struck a chord. Readers responded to these letters like nothing before, launching Dickinson to celebrity status around the Atlantic world. Even before all the letters had been published, the Massachusetts Assembly, led by Samuel Adams, was inspired on February 11, 1768, to answer the Farmer with a circular letter sent to all the colonies encouraging them to unite and join in a nonimportation agreement. The town of Boston thanked the Farmer in the newspapers for spurring them to action.[19] This was exactly what Dickinson had in mind. He encouraged the resistance during the summer with the publication of America's first patriotic song, known as "The Liberty Song." It contained America's first national motto: "By *uniting* we stand, by *dividing* we fall."[20] From these two publications, people around the Atlantic world, including Adams, and from as far away as Poland knew and idolized the Farmer. The resistance worked. Parliament began repealing the legislation in March 1770.

Most colonists, however, did not understand peaceful principles of resistance. When the governor of Massachusetts dissolved the Massachusetts Assembly after its members refused his order to rescind the circular letter, Bostonians responded with more mob violence. Having anticipated

further unrest, the British ministry had already ordered troops to be stationed in Boston. The same month that the Townshend Acts were repealed, a crowd of Bostonians instigated the so-called Boston Massacre by threatening a small group of British soldiers. At the trial of those soldiers, John Adams and Josiah Quincy, attorneys for the defendants, began by invoking the Farmer and quoting a passage from his letters about the dangers of violent resistance.[21]

As tensions mounted during the 1770s, no American wielded more power and influence than Dickinson. As historian Richard Ryerson put it, Dickinson was "an eloquent, widely respected resistance leader, a role that was uniquely his."[22] Radicals and leaders in other colonies—Alexander McDougall of New York, Samuel Adams of Boston, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, his brother Arthur Lee in London, and the Rhode Island legislature—wrote to Dickinson seeking his legal services, soliciting his counsel, and urging him to take up his pen to guide them. He obliged strategically, when the situation warranted, and he wrote repeatedly to leaders in Boston. His message at each turn was to remain unified and resist firmly but peaceably.

With its government taken over by British officials and troops on the ground to support them, Massachusetts was certainly in a difficult position. But continued violence could only bring down the wrath of the ministry upon the colony more severely. And so it did. After the passage of the 1773 Tea Act, Dickinson wrote as "Rusticus," urging that Philadelphians be vigilant about their rights. But despite Dickinson's repeated and urgent pleas to the leaders in Boston for peace, Samuel Adams led a number of inhabitants in the Boston Tea Party in December, which, predictably, led to the passage of the Coercive Acts in early 1774. Parliament intended to make Boston an example. Knowing that this new punishment was a response to how Bostonians had "imprudently acted [in] our Past," Samuel Adams turned to Dickinson for advice.[23] Dickinson responded with another series of letters urging unity and peaceful resistance. They were reprinted in Boston with an editorial note announcing that they came from the pen of the Farmer.[24]

In 1774, Philadelphia was the site of tornadic activity with Dickinson at the center. "It was owing to his farmers letters, and his conduct," observed Philadelphia lawyer Joseph Reed, "that there was a present disposition to oppose the tyranny of Parliament."[25] With the Quaker Assembly refusing to sanction resistance, Dickinson proposed a system of committees and conventions to bypass it.[26] Over the months before independence, this system served as a shadow government in Pennsylvania, taking on the tasks the assembly refused to perform. Dickinson was a leading member of every major committee through 1775. His role during this time extended the approach he had pursued since the publication of the *Farmer's Letters*, only now more intensively: on the one hand, reining in the radical elements—in Pennsylvania and other colonies—to keep them from careening toward war and, on the other, encouraging the reluctant and conservative segments of Pennsylvania to join the resistance. It was a delicate balancing act that required masterful strategic thinking combined with force of personality and influence to realize it. By the middle of summer, it was finally established that there would be a colony-wide congress, but Dickinson's old rival Joseph Galloway, speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, contrived to exclude him from the delegation.

Now John Adams joined the resistance as a member of Massachusetts's delegation to the First Continental Congress. When he arrived in Philadelphia, he, like most members, was eager to meet the celebrated Pennsylvania Farmer. Each time Adams interacted with Dickinson, he recorded the encounter enthusiastically in his diary.[27] Although Dickinson was not present when the Congress convened on September 5, his agenda dominated. Samuel Adams proclaimed him a "true Bostonian," and approved "his opinion that if Boston can safely remain on the defensive the Liberties of America which that Town have so nobly contended for will be secured."[28] Dickinson worked behind the scenes, writing documents and guiding the proceedings in absentia. The delegates were in agreement that they should codify their unity, seek reconciliation with Britain, and maintain their resistance using peaceful means. John Adams, while serving on committees and contributing to the debates, played a role much like

Dickinson's as he sought to restrain inhabitants of Massachusetts from resorting to violence against the British.[29]

Adams remained enamored of Dickinson until the Farmer was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly and became a delegate to Congress in October. Then Adams watched in dismay as Dickinson's work supplanted his own. Realizing that he would not receive the recognition he thought he deserved as an author, Adams began to grumble about the proceedings, and his confessions to his diary about Dickinson cooled noticeably. Whereas before Dickinson was "very ingenious" with "an excellent Heart," now suddenly, he was "very modest, delicate, and timid."[30] Of the six documents the First Continental Congress produced, Dickinson was the primary draftsman of four: the Petition to the King, "To the Inhabitants of the Colonies," *A Letter to the Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec*, and The Bill of Rights [and] List of Grievances. There is, however, much confusion surrounding the last. Scholars have determined that both Dickinson and Adams produced drafts, but it's unclear which came first. If Dickinson was the main draftsman, Adams made contributions to the fourth resolve, which asserted that only the colonists could legislate for the colonies.[31]

Two related experiences with Quakers from this time vexed Adams for decades to come and shaped his opinion of Dickinson. One was observing Dickinson's relationship with the women in his life. During the First Continental Congress, Adams dined at Dickinson's home and met his wife, Polly, and mother, Mary, both of whom freely offered Dickinson their political opinions. Adams proclaimed himself "very fond of the Society of females," would occasionally offer enlightened views of women and their abilities, and was himself married to a highly intelligent, strong-willed, and politically savvy woman. But he also confessed that he had "a Terror of learned Ladies" and suggested they should remain in their proper place without advanced education or discussion of politics.[32]

Adams was horrified by how freely the Dickinson women spoke, along with Dickinson's willingness to accept their counsel on political matters. Despite Abigail's being at least as outspoken as Polly, Adams announced,

"If I had had such a mother and such a wife, I believe I should have shot myself."[33] Elaborating, he said, "If my Mother and my Wife had expressed such Sentiments to me, I was certain, that if they did not wholly unman me and make me an Apostate, they would make me the most miserable Man alive."[34] Dickinson, by contrast, had always been surrounded by strong Quaker women, whose religious tradition elevated women's roles in the household and the larger community.[35] He therefore believed girls should receive the same education as boys, paid special attention to women's issues in his law practice and as a legislator, and advised his daughters to maintain their independence by never giving over their property to a husband, as was common practice.[36]

Another incident set Adams against Quakers and, by extension, Dickinson. Having learned that the Baptists in Massachusetts were denied their religious liberty by being compelled by law to pay taxes to support the established Congregational Church, leading Philadelphia Quakers summoned the Massachusetts delegation to an "interview," where they took them to task. "Old Israel Pemberton"—Polly's cousin—"was quite rude, and his Rudeness was resented," Adams recounted.[37] This experience, combined with Adams's impression of Polly and Mary, informed Adams's future opinion and treatment of Quakers and Dickinson.

Between the end of the First Continental Congress in October 1774 and the beginning of the Second Continental Congress in May 1775, Dickinson and Adams worked for the American cause. Dickinson continued to serve in the Pennsylvania Assembly and on various committees in the Pennsylvania shadow government. Adams, likewise, was appointed to serve in the Massachusetts provincial congress. In early 1775, he began writing his first publication for the cause. Between January and April, Adams published 13 letters as Novanglus in response to a series of letters by Massachusettensis arguing in support of Britain. Although they did not circulate widely until well after the revolutionary era, nor was Adams's authorship known until then, the Novanglus essays offered sophisticated theorizing on republican government and were important for Adams personally as he formulated his political philosophy. With an inflammatory

tone, they were a wide-ranging defense of American actions, even though Adams ultimately argued for reconciliation with Britain and declared his loyalty to George III.[38]

War or Reconciliation?

The Battles of Lexington and Concord, on April 19, changed the equation significantly, but not entirely. Dickinson led efforts in Philadelphia to build a military force, raising the First Philadelphia Battalion of Associators, of which he was commissioned colonel. He subscribed to Quaker constitution theory to the extent that he believed the union with Britain should be preserved and reformed through peaceful means. But he was neither a Quaker nor a rigid pacifist. In other words, he believed God allowed defensive war, and he had always been a proponent of a robust militia.[39]

With the opening of the Second Continental Congress on May 10, Dickinson still controlled the body's agenda. At first, Adams deferred to him, but by midsummer, his sentiment changed, and he began working to undermine Dickinson and his plan for reconciliation. Given that scholars have relied so heavily on this period and Adams's account of it to characterize Dickinson, a careful reconstruction of the evidence is warranted.

Through the first session, which lasted until August 1, Dickinson dominated. In debates that took place between May 15 and 26, he stayed the course for reconciliation, willing the more "forward spirits," as Quakers might have called them, to check their separatist impulses. Although the records of the debates are scant, a few things can be known. On May 16, after John Rutledge asked whether America was aiming at independence, Adams responded in his "lengthy, and Argumentative" way that "a dependance on the Crown is what we own."[40] Dickinson then proposed a three-part plan consisting of steps for peace, war, and negotiations, explaining that measures for peace must go "pari pasu," that is, hand in hand, with measures for war.[41] The deliberations lasted several days.

On May 24, some members expressed great displeasure at Dickinson's insistence on slow, conciliatory steps, but Adams was not named among them.[42] On the contrary, on May 21 and 29, Adams actually thought well enough of Dickinson to write home that "the martial Spirit" in Pennsylvania was "astonishing" and "amazing" and that "the Farmer is a Col[one]l."[43] When Congress voted on Dickinson's plan on May 26, the preparations for war and the petition for peace passed unanimously, while the proposal for negotiations passed but not unanimously.[44]

In mid-June, as Dickinson worked out the elements of his plan, Adams still largely shared his understanding of how Congress should proceed. On June 10, he echoed Dickinson's language, saying that Congress should "proceed with Warlike Measures, and conciliatory Measures Pari Passu."[45] He likewise explained to Abigail on June 11 that

> America is a great, unwieldy Body. Its Progress must be slow. It is like a large Fleet sailing under Convoy. The fleetest Sailors must wait for the dullest and slowest. Like a Coach and six—the swiftest Horses must be slackened and the slowest quickened, that all may keep an even Pace.[46]

Samuel Adams was also greatly satisfied with Congress's resolutions, believing "matters are finally well decided."[47]

By the beginning of July, the two initial elements of Dickinson's plan were ready for debate. The first part was the so-called Olive Branch Petition. John Jay attempted a draft, but Dickinson produced the final version. It affirmed Americans' devotion to the king and humbly pleaded with him to rescue them from his rapacious and corrupt ministers. It mentioned neither rights nor negotiations, as Jay's version did. Today, many find this petition foolish and naive. But even as Dickinson hoped it would work, he knew it wouldn't. Rather, this was a highly strategic move by a skilled lawyer intended to give Americans legal cover in several ways. First, it would prove that they had done all they could to resolve the matter peacefully, casting them in the role of martyrs and winning the world—especially

friends in England—to their side. Second, it would give them critical time to prepare for war. Third, it would give justification—both to themselves and the world—for their resistance by arms.[48] The petition passed on July 5 with no member commenting on the debate, though Dickinson himself did report that it was "vigorously attacked," perhaps by Adams, though he doesn't specify.[49] Charles Thomson later said the petition "ought to have redounded to [Dickinson's] credit as a politician."[50]

Adams had voted in favor of the petition in May, and he signed it on July 5. On that day and July 6 in two detailed letters, one of which violated Congress's rule of secrecy, Adams complained about the "Strange Oscillation between . . . Preparations for War, and Negociations for Peace." Yet he also recognized that these measures were necessary. "We must have a Petition to the King, and a delicate Proposal of Negociation &c.," he explained. "This Negociation I dread like Death. But it must be proposed. We cant avoid it. Discord and total Disunion would be the certain Effect of a resolute Refusal to petition and negotiate." Moreover, Adams recognized that proceeding to negotiations could work to America's advantage. "We may possibly gain Time and Powder and Arms," he observed.[51] Adams also took the opportunity to complain about three "lukewarm" men in Philadelphia—Thomas Willing, William Smith, and Israel Pemberton—who, because of the unanimity on the current measures, were "obliged to lie low." Had his irritation extended to Dickinson, Adams surely would have mentioned him, but he did not.[52] Nor did he report any speech against the petition.

The second element of Dickinson's plan was the Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms. It would ostensibly be directed to the newly mustered American troops, but its actual intended audience was Parliament. After Thomas Jefferson wrote an unsatisfactory, tepid first draft, Dickinson stepped in and revised it into a rousing, patriotic call to arms. It proclaimed America's eagerness for a just war of self-defense, assuring listeners that Americans were prepared with weapons, troops, foreign support, and God on their side. But it was all strategic bluster, intended to produce such "apprehensions" in the British that they would

reconsider engaging the colonists in a civil war.[53] So satisfied was Adams with it that he said, "It has Some Mercury in it, and is pretty frank, plain, and clear. If Lord North dont compliment . . . us, with a Bill of Attainder, in Exchange for it, I shall think it owing to Fear."[54] The Congress adopted it on July 6.

In mid-July, well after deliberations on reconciliation had concluded, Adams became increasingly discontent with the proceedings in Congress. His main bone of contention was how military officers were being appointed.[55] Unable to censor himself, he repeatedly violated congressional secrecy to complain to friends in Massachusetts. On July 23, he blamed his colleagues in general and the Massachusetts delegation in particular. "Many Things may be wrong," he said, "but no small Proportion of these are to be attributed to the Want of Concert, and Union among the Mass. Delegates."[56] The same day, speaking generally about Pennsylvania's sluggish resistance, he turned on Dickinson, although Dickinson was among those most responsible for Pennsylvania's mounting any resistance. After calling him an "overgrown Fortune," Adams described his military activities, which he had praised in May, as only "pretend[ing] to be very valiant."[57]

The next day, he wrote the now-notorious letter to the president of Massachusetts's provincial congress, James Warren, saying, "A certain great Fortune and piddling Genius, whose Fame has been trumpeted so loudly, has given a silly Cast to our whole Doings." He then listed several unrealistic goals he wanted the Congress to have accomplished before they petitioned and negotiated, including raising a navy and arresting every Loyalist on the continent. But these desires were no more realistic than his characterization of Dickinson. "Is all this extravagant?—Is it wild?—Is it not the soundest Policy?" he asked rhetorically.[58]

The reason for Congress's rule of secrecy became clear when the British intercepted Adams's letter to Warren and published the contents in *The Massachusetts Gazette* on August 17. Later that fall, Adams admitted to Continental Army General Charles Lee that he had written the letter "in a pet just after a warm squabble," that it was a "gross misrepresentation,"

and that he knew Dickinson to be "a Man of genius and integrity."[59] In the short term, the only damage Adams inflicted was on himself. So widely respected was Dickinson that the other members of Congress shunned Adams for weeks in solidarity with the Farmer.[60] But the damage that would be done to Dickinson's legacy when historians discovered the remark—and missed the retraction—was immeasurable.

Not only did Adams never apologize for the slight; he added injury to the insult with an entry in his diary 30 years later. In 1805, Adams's memory was shaky on many facts. Scholars have found that he frequently misremembered his own role in events favorably.[61] Yet many still accept Adams's account of what the editors of his papers call "the monumental dispute with John Dickinson over the second petition to the King and the whole question of reconciliation."[62] Yet there is no evidence of such a dispute.

In his diary, Adams painted a self-serving picture with a series of implausible claims. Portraying Dickinson as a pitiful figure, browbeaten by his wife and mother into pacifism, Adams claimed that Dickinson was "terrified" and "tremble[d] for his Cause" after Adams gave a compelling speech against the Olive Branch Petition. Then Adams claimed that, as he stepped out of the chamber, Dickinson chased after him and, "in as violent a passion as he was capable of feeling," accosted Adams in a "rough," "haughty," and "rude" manner, as a master would a schoolboy. According to Adams, Dickinson then threatened that he and others would break off from New England and "carry on the Opposition by ourselves in our own Way" if Adams and his faction would not agree to the petition. Adams then recounted how he remained cool and cheerful in the face of Dickinson's abuse, saying that he was "not to be threatened into an express Adoption or Approbation of Measures which my Judgment reprobates."[63]

There is much to contradict this account. First, Dickinson's wife and mother surely did urge pacifism, but it was a position Dickinson had been espousing for a decade and nothing they pressured him into. Second, the only record of Adams giving a speech is *before* Dickinson suggested the petition, and in it, Adams expressed his loyalty to the king. It is plausible

that at some point during that session, Adams and Dickinson engaged in a "squabble," with Dickinson as the aggressor. But if there had been such a squabble about the petition, presumably on July 5, how odd that no one mentioned it, not even Adams in his detailed letters about that day. Third, if Adams so disagreed with the petition, why did he sign it, especially after he allegedly claimed he could not be coerced into it? Assuming there was an encounter that precipitated the letter, the dynamic Adams describes between him and Dickinson strains credulity. Contemporaries usually described Adams as hotheaded and explosive and Dickinson as calm and considered. Finally, Adams's claim that Dickinson threatened to break away from New England is absurd, considering that Dickinson's priority was always American unity above all else.[64]

It appears that Adams spun this tale to justify his gross breach of decorum and ad hominem attacks on Dickinson in the July 24 letter. Adams concludes his 1805 account with a number of excuses for the "unfortunate Accident"—namely, the interception and publication of his letter by the British: First, he wrote it in a hurry so he could give a messenger boy some business, though the two letters he gave him don't seem rushed. Second, he had grown irritated by Dickinson's "unpoliteness" and "mortified with his Success in Congress." Finally, "the printers made it worse, than it was in the Original," a claim the editors of his papers disbelieve.[65] Despite the transparency of these protests and the misalignment of the account with the extant records, scholars' reliance on Adams's misrepresentations have, more than any other single cause, consigned Dickinson to obscurity for nearly two centuries.

During the fall of 1775, Dickinson and Adams, no longer on speaking terms, continued working for the American cause. Dickinson concentrated his efforts on the practical considerations of preparing for war, serving as a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, the convention-committee system in Pennsylvania, and the Second Continental Congress. His reelection to the assembly by a wide margin signaled the overwhelming support in Pennsylvania for his agenda. Adams, meanwhile, continued in Congress, making a start on his major contribution to the cause. On October 18, the

New Hampshire provincial convention requested that Congress guide it on the matter of creating a stronger government. In the ensuing debates, Adams offered ideas for a republican form of government that built on his theories in *Letters of Novanglus*. These ideas caught the attention of his colleagues, and Richard Henry Lee of Virginia requested that Adams put his thoughts on paper.[66]

Aware that Adams's design was to set up republics as preparation for separation, Dickinson responded to this effort on November 7, after the assembly reappointed him as a delegate to Congress and charged him with writing new instructions for the Pennsylvania delegation. Knowing his constituents did not want separation—even radicals in Pennsylvania still proclaimed allegiance to the Crown—his instructions disallowed the delegates from voting for any measures that would result in independence and said they should reject any motion that would lead to a change in the Pennsylvania government.[67] As it would be impossible to attempt independence without Pennsylvania, with this brief document, Dickinson controlled not only Pennsylvania but the fate of all the colonies. Add to this that he de facto commanded the colony's militia, and it would seem that, in this moment, he deserved the title of most powerful man in America.[68]

Toward Independence

But in early 1776, events unfolded rapidly, and not in Dickinson's desired direction. In January, Dickinson and his allies attempted to implement the third part of his plan for reconciliation—namely, sending and receiving agents to or from Britain for negotiations. He reminded his colleagues that in anything they did, they were obliged to obtain "full & free Consent of the People plainly exprest." Now, he observed, "The Sense of America as exprest is for Reconciliation."[69] But this fact was becoming increasingly uncertain. Only a few days before this remark, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* appeared, putting the matter of independence and republicanism

before the American people and compelling a full hearing. In February, Colonel Dickinson volunteered to lead his battalion to meet the British Army when it returned with reinforcements to occupy New York. In April, his work included facilitating negotiations with Native Americans to secure their allegiance.

Now that he was committed to revolution, arguably Adams's most important and tangible contribution to the American cause before independence was *Thoughts on Government*, published on April 22, 1776. Drawn from his work the previous year on *Letters of Novanglus* and the letter he wrote to Lee the previous fall, this brief pamphlet appeared after William Hooper and John Penn of North Carolina and Jonathan Dickinson Sargent of New Jersey also asked for Adams's advice on reforming their governments. Ryerson finds that *Thoughts on Government* was the most consequential document on republican structures. Yet he also finds that "its impact on state constitution making in 1776 cannot be determined with any certainty."[70] Besides the 1780 Massachusetts constitution, which Adams drafted, Ryerson speculates that his ideas were probably most influential in Virginia and North Carolina, where he had friends and allies.[71]

The Pennsylvania radicals were restive and increasingly resentful of the obstructionism of their assembly, led by Dickinson. They plotted to pack it with supporters at a by-election on May 1, but they failed. Instead, the election showed that Philadelphians were evenly divided on the independence question. The radicals then turned to Congress for help. Before it could respond, Philadelphians learned on May 6 that the British had hired Hessian mercenaries to fight them and on May 8 that the HMS *Roebuck* had attacked Pennsylvania's gunboats on the Delaware River.

Then, on May 10, Congress acted. Adams motioned that all colonies with royal governments or those otherwise unfriendly to independence be replaced with ones loyal to the cause.[72] Dickinson responded that the duly elected Pennsylvania Assembly could continue to act on behalf of its constituents, as it was not under the control of Pennsylvania's royalist governor.[73] Adams answered this assertion with a preamble to the motion, passed

on May 15, which said any government under the Crown that still required an oath or affirmation must be replaced.[74] On May 20, the Pennsylvania radicals held a meeting in which they essentially announced the end of the assembly and sent a protest to the colony's house affirming their agreement with the May 15 preamble. Unwilling to acquiesce to the coup of a legally elected body, Dickinson drafted and achieved passage of a resolution in the assembly on May 24 rendering oaths and affirmations unnecessary.[75]

By June, however, it was clear that Congress would declare independence. Dickinson's practical reasons for not wanting it, at least not at that moment, were these: Contrary to his bellicose language in the Declaration on Taking Up Arms, Americans were woefully unprepared. They had minimal armed forces, with little training or ability to manufacture weapons and ammunition. Neither had they committed foreign support. These deficits made them vulnerable to not only the British but also Indian attacks and foreign invasion. Among Americans themselves, there was lack of unity, with many not wanting independence. They had no national constitution or governmental structures to execute a war or protect Americans' rights. Dickinson was particularly anxious about the security of religious liberty in Pennsylvania and also for the protection of the rights of the most vulnerable in society—namely, dissenters, widows and orphans, the poor, and enslaved people. Most of these groups would have a better chance if Pennsylvania remained under the British constitution rather than an as yet undecided American one.

Uppermost in Dickinson's mind were his constituents and family—namely, Quakers and other religious dissenters who enjoyed unique protections under the 1701 Pennsylvania constitution. The clause in the constitution for freedom of conscience allowed Pennsylvanians to worship as they pleased and participate in government. If America stayed within the British Empire, their constitution would remain securely in place. If it separated, Quakers' enemies would take over. With Adams's motion, the Pennsylvania convention, which Dickinson had been instrumental in founding but which had since filled with men hostile to the Quakers, was poised to overthrow the Pennsylvania government and constitution.

Although there were other colonies that had not yet given their delegates permission to vote for independence, the only one that mattered was Pennsylvania, restrained by Dickinson's November 1775 instructions. Even as he disagreed profoundly with his colleagues in the Second Continental Congress, Dickinson understood that many were moving toward declaring independence. He believed that the decision by Congress must be unanimous to present a show of American unity to the world. Thus, on June 5, 1776, he wrote new instructions that sought to provide for both American unity and individual conscience. They permitted the Pennsylvania delegates to vote their consciences and, if they thought it proper, concur with other delegates for independence. Knowing the instructions would be approved, Lee motioned on June 7 in Congress that there be a declaration of independence. Dickinson's instructions were approved by the Pennsylvania Assembly the next day, and the Revolution was on.

The remainder of June was dense with work, with Dickinson and Adams at the center of it. Congress appointed three drafting committees to produce crucial documents—a declaration of independence, a model treaty on which to base treaties of commerce with foreign governments, and a constitution for the new United States of America. Adams was on the first two committees, and Dickinson was on the latter two. Adams was also appointed to the Board of War and Ordnance, on which over the next months he played a more active role than on either the declaration committee or the model treaty committee.[76]

On the Declaration, Adams likely made only two changes to Jefferson's draft, though historians are not certain of either.[77] On the model treaty, his role is less certain than once thought. Scholars have long believed that he drafted the entire document of 33 articles himself, writing the first 13 from scratch and drawing on reference books for the rest. But recently, an early draft of the first 10 articles and notes for three more were discovered in Dickinson's papers, in his hand. The first 13 articles Adams wrote appear to be a clean copy of these. This critical but little-known document provided the basis for American foreign policy until World War II.[78]

Dickinson worked alone on the draft of the Articles of Confederation, so his ideas are clear. They were among the most remarkable of the revolutionary era. He provided for a strong central government with states subordinate to it, giving the power to, among other things, call up militias without permission of the states. Most significantly, he wrote an extensive clause for religious liberty and toleration that would prevent the inhabitants of every state from losing any rights. In perhaps the most revolutionary—and Quakerly—move of the Revolution, he used gender-inclusive language to protect women's religious liberty and their freedom of public speech. Only two months earlier, Adams had laughed at Abigail when she implored him to "remember the Ladies" when declaring independence. Claiming facetiously that it was the women who actually held the power in society, he rejected the "Despotism of the Peticoat."[79] Dickinson also queried whether slavery should be outlawed in the states. None of his provisions survived in the version that was ratified in 1781. Some of them, however, were later adopted in the US Constitution.[80]

On July 1, the most famous debate of the Revolution occurred between Dickinson and Adams over declaring independence. Dickinson began, reiterating the same concerns he had expressed since the beginning of the contest with Britain about American unity and preparedness, internal and external threats, lack of foreign support, and other obvious disadvantages. He urged waiting to declare, arguing that after a couple of failed campaigns, the British would be ready to accede to all of their demands in the 1774 "Petition to the King."[81] Adams responded, presumably with a similar reiteration of his position. Witnesses to the speeches found them eloquent and honorable. By now, of course, the majority of Congress agreed with Adams, and a preliminary vote proved it. But despite Adams's victory and secure place as the "Atlas of Independence" in the minds of Americans, the specter of Dickinson's powerful resistance haunted him for decades.

What Dickinson did after his loss was one of the most patriotic acts of the Revolution. To give the appearance of unanimity, on July 2, he, along with fellow delegate Robert Morris, abstained from the vote on

independence. This decision enabled a slim majority of the Pennsylvania delegation to vote in favor of the measure. Following the Quaker practice of preserving unity, Dickinson was then obliged to support the cause. He thus led his battalion to the New Jersey front to fight the British in New York. The self-sacrifice of these acts is on a par with Washington's much-heralded resignation as commander in chief of the Continental Army at the end of the war. Each man relinquished considerable power and placed the American cause ahead of his own self-interest. It is clear that had Dickinson signed the Declaration of Independence, he would have secured untold power for himself in the new nation.

Ultimately, Adams had to admit that Dickinson had been correct in some key strategic assessments. "The delay of this Declaration to this Time, has many great advantages attending it," he confessed on July 3. Among other things, he said, "this will cement the Union, and avoid those Heats and perhaps Convulsions which might have been occasioned, by such a Declaration Six Months ago."[82] Although that is indeed what Dickinson had hoped, Adams was very mistaken in his assessment. In fact, Adams himself was partly responsible for one of the darkest episodes of the Revolution.

As the war was going poorly for the Americans in the summer of 1777, Paine blamed Quakers, suggesting that they were Tories and ought to be arrested. At the end of August, papers from a fictitious Quaker meeting surfaced, allegedly proving that New Jersey Quakers were conspiring against the American cause. These papers were placed before Adams, who was chair of a congressional committee to consider the matter.[83] In consequence of his report, Congress directed the Pennsylvania government to arrest and hold 20 leading Philadelphians, among them prominent Quakers such as Pemberton who were also Dickinson's kinsmen.

In September, these men were rounded up without warrant, charge, or trial and their homes searched. Although it was well-known that Quakers refused to swear oaths to anyone or anything, they were detained and sent to Virginia when they refused to swear an oath of allegiance to America. "We have been obliged to attempt to humble the Pride of some

Jesuits who call themselves Quakers," wrote Adams to Abigail, "but who love Money and Land better than Liberty or Religion. The Hypocrites are endeavouring to raise the Cry of Persecution, and to give this Matter a religious Turn, but they cant succeed. The World knows them and their Communications."[84]

The Quakers were in a hopeless situation. When they petitioned Congress, they were directed to the Pennsylvania government. When they petitioned the Pennsylvania government, they were directed to Congress. Their families and businesses suffered, and some died. They were finally released nine months later without explanation or restitution.[85] Later, two other Quakers were singled out and executed by the Pennsylvania government.[86] This targeting of dissenters was exactly what Dickinson had feared would happen without protections for rights secured at either the state or national level.

Two Lives of Service

Adams continued serving the American cause for over two decades more, but with mixed success. He chaired the Board of War for 13 months, from June 13 through October 11, 1776, and from February 4, 1777, until he left Congress on November 8, 1777.[87] Although it was a demanding position, the editors of his papers explain that, unfortunately, there is little extant information on Adams's specific work.[88] Then for a decade beginning in 1778, he served as a diplomat in France, Holland, and England, returning home only once, for four months in 1779, when he drafted the Massachusetts constitution. Congress selected Adams as a diplomatic envoy because of his vast knowledge of Europe and his powers of persuasion at home. But these strengths were offset by Adams's inability to regulate his temper and get along with his fellow diplomats, especially Benjamin Franklin, whose letter home describing Adams as "absolutely out of his Senses" damaged Adams's reputation significantly.[89] Ultimately, Bernstein finds that Adams's sole diplomatic success, aside from securing rights to

Newfoundland fisheries in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, came in 1785 when he negotiated a treaty with Prussia.[90]

While in London in 1787 and 1788, Adams published *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* to mixed reviews. Not only did this work not influence the creation of the US Constitution, as some have claimed; it convinced many that Adams was a monarchist. He returned permanently to the United States in 1788. From 1789 to 1796, he served as vice president to Washington. Another set of essays during that period, *Discourses on Davila* (1790–91), as well as his unforced error of proposing honorific titles for the president, provoked even more concerns that Adams was a proponent of aristocracy and monarchy. Ryerson explains that Adams's fascination with aristocracy was not because he favored it but because he feared it.[91] But his efforts to communicate his position clearly failed.

Adams was nevertheless viewed as the rightful successor to Washington, serving as president from 1797 to 1801. By most accounts, Adams's single term was not successful. By that time, his ideas of republicanism were significantly out of step with mainstream American thought. A better theorist than practitioner of politics, Adams was temperamentally ill-suited to the office and made unfortunate policy choices, most notably signing the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts into law. When he was not reelected, he imagined that none other than John and Polly Dickinson had fomented a conspiracy against him. Reasoning that because Dickinson and his allies could not stop Adams from achieving American independence, Adams believed that Dickinson, Polly, and their Quaker relatives had conducted a smear campaign in retaliation that persisted over the course of more than 20 years and led to Jefferson's election.[92]

Upon leaving office, Adams retired to his farm in Massachusetts and lived his remaining years without practicing law or politics but for two exceptions. From 1809 to 1812, he published a series of letters to the *Boston Patriot* newspaper, intended in part to do battle with old enemies and new—Franklin and Alexander Hamilton, both deceased, and Mercy Otis Warren, who painted him unfavorably in her 1805 *History of the Rise,*

Progress and Termination of the American Revolution. Although Adams didn't mention Dickinson by name, he too was a target: "The Quakers and Proprietary Gentry," said Adams, "were perpetually Slandering me, because they had conceived an opinion, derived probably from their Confidants in Congress [i.e., Dickinson], that I was the great Leader and Champion of Independence."[93]

Finally, Adams served as a delegate to the Massachusetts constitutional convention from November 1820 to January 1821. Having mellowed religiously in his old age, he was gradually coming closer to Dickinson's way of thinking on at least one thing. Now a Unitarian, Adams made only one motion in the convention, to broaden religious toleration under the established church, which failed.

Despite myths to the contrary, Dickinson did not retire after the Declaration of Independence passed. With the advent of the new revolutionary government in Pennsylvania, he was turned out of the assembly and Congress. Nevertheless, like Adams, he too published his ideas for state government and had a hand in constitution making. In July 1776, he published *An Essay of a Frame of Government for Pennsylvania*, clearly written at the same time as the Articles of Confederation.[94] It recommended a bicameral legislature and an executive council. A single executive, Dickinson believed, was too monarchical. He also recommended the same gender-inclusive provision for religious liberty he had written into the Articles of Confederation and a law prohibiting slavery. Pennsylvanians rejected Dickinson's ideas as they had Adams's, instead creating a constitution both men found monstrous, with a domineering unicameral legislature. Even Adams saw the merit of Dickinson's presence as a moderating force in Pennsylvania and wished that Dickinson and others "may be restored, at a fresh Election, because, altho mistaken in some Points, they are good Characters, and their great Wealth and numerous Connections, will contribute to strengthen America, and cement her Union."[95]

Adams got his wish, but it was short-lived. When Dickinson returned with his battalion to Philadelphia in September 1776, he was immediately reelected to the assembly. At the same time, members of the Maryland

constitutional convention requested his assistance in drafting their constitution and declaration of rights, inviting him to Annapolis to advise them. They believed he "could render very great and essential Service to our State."[96] Dickinson could not attend, but he did send his comments on their work.[97] His radical colleagues in Pennsylvania took the opposite view of Dickinson's, spurning his guidance. After they rejected his proposal that their faulty 1776 constitution be amended, he resigned his seat. Angered at Dickinson's departure, they fabricated charges of treason against him—including not signing the Declaration, as though that were a crime—and pursued him as an enemy of the state, seizing his house in Philadelphia, which amounted to a loss of £10,000.[98] These politically motivated acts were the only backlash during Dickinson's lifetime for his stance—or alleged stance—on the Declaration.

Dickinson's response was to double down on patriotism. The following spring and summer, he did two things unheard of for a gentleman of his stature. First, he freed conditionally, and then later unconditionally, his family's enslaved men, women, and children and became an abolitionist, one of the only leading founders to attempt to realize the ideals in the Declaration of Independence.[99] Second, he enlisted in the Delaware militia as a private and served during the summer of 1777, even as Patriots arrested his Quaker relatives. That autumn, the British burned his estate outside Philadelphia to the ground.

In 1779, he was a delegate to Congress, where he served on at least 24 committees. In 1781, after Loyalists plundered his Delaware estate, he was elected to the Delaware Assembly, then the Executive Council, then the presidency, where he reformed all the major institutions and transformed Delaware from a failing to a model state. After only one year of his three-year term, he was elected president of Pennsylvania, where he served the maximum of three terms. There, among other things, he suppressed a civil war between Pennsylvania and Connecticut residents and a mutiny of Continental soldiers fomented by members of Congress, including Hamilton, prevented a western region from seceding, settled the boundary with Virginia, and worked to establish a national bank. In

1786 and again in 1793, he attempted and failed to get a bill for the abolition of slavery passed in Delaware.

When the Annapolis Convention met to amend the Articles of Confederation in 1786, Dickinson was elected chairman, and his letter calling for a federal convention was read before Congress. Before he attended the 1787 convention, he published a brief pamphlet sketching ideas for reforming the Articles of Confederation. At the convention, despite illness, he made several significant contributions, including offering the basis for what is now known as the Connecticut Compromise (proportional representation in the House and equal in the Senate), along with the solar system metaphor to explain it.[100] He also advocated ending the slave trade and changing language in the fugitive slave clause that suggested slavery was legal. Although he wanted direct election of the executive by the people, he was responsible at least for the electors in the Electoral College being chosen by the people of each state rather than Congress.[101] After the convention, in 1788, he published a widely respected series of nine letters under the pseudonym Fabius that advocated ratification of the Constitution and fully embraced a democratic version of republicanism. From 1791 to 1792, he served as president of the Delaware constitutional convention, participating actively through both sessions. The following year, he served in the Delaware Assembly from January through June. Throughout this time, he continued to practice law, serve as a judge, and manage his vast tenant properties throughout the Delaware Valley.

When Dickinson retired from public service to Wilmington, Delaware, in 1793, he continued engaging in politics and philanthropy. During Washington's and Adams's Federalist administrations, he protested and worked to shape public opinion in various ways, including leading a citizens' group against the Jay Treaty and authoring several pamphlets on improving relations with France and one on the education of youth. He acted as a mentor to future Pennsylvania Senator George Logan, who was inspired by Dickinson's Farmer persona to become a major force behind the democratic agrarian movement.[102] After Adams passed the 1798 Sedition Act, Dickinson immediately challenged it by writing a critique of the

Adams administration.[103] During the Jefferson administration, Dickinson served as an informal adviser to the president and worked actively behind the scenes to write and pass legislation in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and the United States. He was in close contact with Senator Logan, US Attorney General Caesar A. Rodney, and former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Tench Francis, who all kept him apprised of doings in high politics. At various times, citizens in several states clamored for him to stand for election, and he refused all but once, in the fall of 1807, when he allowed his name to be put forward by the Democratic-Republicans as a candidate for Congress. He was not elected.

During the last two decades of his life, Dickinson was a leading philanthropist of the era as he advocated the causes dear to Quakers. With his lucrative law practice and tenant properties inherited from his father and father-in-law and purchased with his own money, he was one of the wealthiest men in America. But rather than live extravagantly, he dressed, dined, and spoke in the plain Quaker way and used his wealth to allow all members of American society to be contributing citizens. He had always donated his salaries to widows, orphans, and soldiers; aided the poor in general; and supported many boys through school. He also was guardian for the orphaned children of several friends, sometimes adopting them into his own family. Now, his and Polly's greatest causes were education, especially for poor black and white children of both genders; learning in general; religion without regard for denomination; and prison reform. Among the many institutions they helped found were Westtown School and the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, known today as the Pennsylvania Prison Society.[104]

Dickinson and Adams neither reconciled nor forgave one another for slights, real or imagined. For Dickinson, the animus stemmed from Adams's "piddling Genius" remark. For Adams, it originated from an imagined conspiracy against him, led by the Dickinsons. Their parting shots at one another are glimpses into their personalities. When Jefferson was elected president, Dickinson said to him, "I should like to see the son of *our* Enemy, John Adams, appointed Minister to the Court of

Petersburgh." His motive was altruistic. "This honorable Regard to a falling Family," he said, "will be soothing to them."[105] By contrast, Adams could not think kindly of Dickinson even after Dickinson's death in 1808. To Jefferson in 1813, with whom he was now reconciled, he described Dickinson as "primus inter pares," first among equals. This sounded like a compliment until he jabbed, "The leader of the Aristocratical flock."[106] Leveling the charge of aristocrat was the greatest insult in Adams's arsenal.

In the final analysis, although Adams and Dickinson were opponents, today we should not take sides. Both were essential to the founding. While Adams should be celebrated for championing independence in the final year before separation, Dickinson ought to be celebrated equally for preparing the way in the decade before and for his sacrifices to preserve the republic after. By encouraging Americans to think of themselves as one people distinct from Britain with an understanding of their rights, making vigorous preparations for war, writing key foundational documents, regulating the behavior of disparate factions, and single-handedly delaying the Declaration just long enough for America to be minimally prepared, Dickinson ensured the success of the Revolutionary War. As *The Philadelphia Inquirer* put it in 1899, Dickinson's work before separation "was as necessary to the Declaration of Independence as the subsequent labors of Washington upon the Battlefield."[107] Had Congress forged ahead with independence as some wanted in the summer of 1775, there is little doubt the Revolution would have failed.

Moreover, if Adams was correct in assuming that the Revolution would succeed, Dickinson was likewise correct that it did not go as smoothly as it could have and Americans' civil rights were violated in the process. Nor should Dickinson be ignored after independence, as he continued to play a leading role in building the nation to ensure the success of the entire revolutionary movement. His vision for the country as a democracy where rights for all people were protected is something to which we still aspire. Dickinson's actions at the moment of independence, far from indicating cowardice or indecision, present a lesson to the American people of the importance of principled dissent and a model of patriotic

behavior, of placing the welfare of the whole above individual ambitions and desires.

In sum, whereas the Puritan theory of revolution was essential to effect a revolution and establish a new constitution, the Quaker theories of unity, individual rights, and peaceful resistance are still essential if we want to keep the constitution we have.

Notes

1. George Bancroft, *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent*, 10 vols. (Little, Brown, 1842–74), esp. vol. 8; and David McCullough, *John Adams* (Simon & Schuster, 2001). The only previous discussion of Adams and Dickinson was by Bernhard Knollenberg, who wrote that Dickinson "ranks with Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams himself as one of the truly great men of the old Continental Congress." Bernhard Knollenberg, "John Dickinson vs. John Adams: 1774–1776," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 2 (1963): 144, https://www.jstor.org/stable/985444. For a fuller discussion of the historiography on Dickinson, see Jane E. Calvert, epilogue to *Penman of the Founding: A Biography of John Dickinson* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

2. What little he did say did not reflect well on her personality or intellect. He described her "cruel Reproaches" of him and her "confused, blundering Way of asking Questions." *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*., ed. L. H. Butterfield (Belknap Press, 1962), 1:64, 79.

3. Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams* (Free Press, 2009), 94.

4. R. B. Bernstein, *The Education of John Adams* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

5. This date is according to the New Style calendar the British Empire adopted in 1753.

6. Calvert, *Penman of the Founding*.

7. John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, ser. 3, vol. 7 (n.p., 1838), 48, https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html.

8. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Belknap Press, 1956), 48–98, 141–52.

9. Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Atheneum, 1976); and Quentin Skinner, "Part Three: Calvinism and the Theory of Revolution," in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), 189–358.

10. Jane E. Calvert, *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

11. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [. . .] (London, 1690), bk. 2, chap. 19, § 235.

12. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*. (Locke is citing the Roman poet Juvenal in offering this image.)

13. Richard Alan Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 50.

14. Although Adams published "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" in 1765, Ryerson concludes that it was not in response to the Stamp Act, nor was it widely known in America until 1783. Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 48.

15. Bernstein, *The Education of John Adams*, 63.

16. John Dickinson to Mary Cadwalader Dickinson, February 19, 1755, in *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson*, ed. Jane E. Calvert, vol. 1, *1751–1758* (University of Delaware Press, 2020), 77.

17. John Dickinson to Samuel Dickinson, June 6, 1756, in Calvert, *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson*, 1:131.

18. John Dickinson, "Friends and Countrymen," in *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson*, ed. Jane E. Calvert, vol. 3, *1764–1766* (University of Delaware Press, 2024), 373–78.

19. A. B. [Samuel Adams?], "Letter to Messieurs Edes and Gill," *The Boston Gazette*, March 14, 1768, in *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson*, ed. Jane E. Calvert, vol. 4, *1767–1769* (University of Delaware Press, 2025), 148.

20. *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, "A Song. To the Tune of Heart of Oak, &c.," July 7, 1768.

21. "Adams' Minutes of Josiah Quincy's Opening for the Defense," in *The Legal Papers of John Adams*, ed. L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel (Belknap Press, 1965), 3:164–65.

22. Richard Alan Ryerson, *The Revolution Is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765–1776* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 92.

23. Samuel Adams to John Dickinson, April 21, 1774, New York Public Library, Samuel Adams Papers, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/0fd1acf0-10ab-0134-fcb9-00505686a51c.

24. John Dickinson, "To the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America," *The Boston Gazette*, June 20, 1774.

25. "Copy of a Paper Drawn Up by Joseph Reed for W. Henry Drayton," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Maria Dickinson Logan Collection.

26. Ryerson, *The Revolution Is Now Begun*, 47.

27. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2:133–55.

28. Samuel Adams to Joseph Warren?, September 25, 1774, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789*, ed. Paul H. Smith (Library of Congress, 1976), 1:100.

29. Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 123–24.

30. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2:133, 157.

31. *A Decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind: Congressional State Papers, 1774–1776*, ed. James H. Hutson (Library of Congress, 1975), 50–52; and Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 124–25.

32. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3:260; and John Adams to François Adriaan Van der Kemp, April 8, 1815, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6451.

33. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past: From the Leaves of Old Journals* (n.p., 1888), 80.

34. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3:316.

35. Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 78.

36. Calvert, *Penman of the Founding*.

37. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2:152.

38. Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 137–54.

39. See, for example, John Dickinson to Samuel Dickinson, June 6, 1756, in Calvert, *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson*, 1:131.

40. *Silas Deane's Diary*, May 16, 1775, in Smith, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:352.

41. John Dickinson, notes, May 23–25, 1775, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection.

42. *Silas Deane's Diary*, May 24, 1775, in Smith, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:401–2.

43. John Adams to James Warren, May 21, 1775, in Smith, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:364. He repeated the same sentiments to Abigail. John Adams to Abigail Adams, May 29, 1775, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Belknap Press, 1963), 1:207.

44. Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, vol. 2, *1775: May 10–September 20* (Government Printing Office, 1905), 64–66.

45. John Adams to Moses Gill, June 10, 1775, in *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Belknap Press, 1979), 3:20–21.

46. John Adams to Abigail Adams, June 11, 1775, in Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1:216.

47. Samuel Adams to James Warren, June 10, 1775, in *Warren–Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence Between John Adams, Samuel Adams, and John Warren* (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1917), 1:55.

48. John Dickinson to Arthur Lee, July 7, 1775, Harvard College, Houghton Library.

49. John Dickinson to David Barclay, August 7, 1775, Bernard Quaritch, Dickinson–Barclay Papers.

50. Charles Thomson, "Early Days of the Revolution in Philadelphia," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 1878, 423, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20084364.

51. John Adams to James Warren, July 6, 1775, in Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:61–62.

52. John Adams to Joseph Palmer, July 6, 1775, in Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:54.

53. Julian P. Boyd, "The Disputed Authorship of the Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms, 1775," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, January 1950, 51–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20088111.

54. John Adams to William Tudor, July 6, 1775, in Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:54.

55. See John Adams to James Warren, July 23, 1775, in Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:86–88.

56. John Adams to James Warren, July 23, 1775, in Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:87.

57. John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 23, 1775, in Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1:253.

58. John Adams to James Warren, July 24, 1775, in Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:89. He wrote a letter to Abigail saying essentially the same thing.

59. Charles Lee to John Dickinson, January 18, 1776, Library Company of Philadelphia, John Dickinson Papers.

60. Bernstein, *The Education of John Adams*, 78.

61. See *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3:318.

62. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:7. See, for example, Jack N. Rakove's account of this same period, based on Adams's writings, in which he says, "If his autobiographical accounts of congressional debates can be trusted." Jack N. Rakove, "The Decision for American Independence: A Reconstruction," in *Perspectives in American History*, ed. Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (Harvard University Press, 1976), 10:244.

63. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3:318.

64. Calvert, *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson*, vol. 4.

65. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3:317–19, 321.

66. Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 166.

67. For the radicals' expression of fealty to the royal family, see *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the Province of Pennsylvania* (n.p., 1777), 538. For the instructions, see page 647. The draft of the instructions in Dickinson's hand is in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Simon Gratz Autograph Collection.

68. John Dickinson, "To My Opponents," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 24, 1782.

69. John Dickinson, "2 Points Recommended & Enjoined by Our Constituents," January 1776, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection.

70. Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 179.

71. Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 180.

72. Dickinson was not opposed to Adams's motion but approved of it, believing that it might hasten reconciliation. He hoped Britain would realize that the longer those governments existed, the harder it would be to offer terms agreeable to Americans. Thomas Rodney to Cæsar Rodney, May 29, 1776, Delaware Historical Society, Rodney Correspondence.

73. Ryerson, *The Revolution Is Now Begun*, 212.

74. Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, vol. 4, *1776: January 1–June 4* (Government Printing Office, 1906), 342, 357–58.

75. For a detailed account of this moment, see Ryerson, *The Revolution Is Now Begun*, 211–16.

76. Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, vol. 5, *1776: June 5–October 8* (Government Printing Office, 1906), 433.

77. See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (Vintage Books, 1998), 110, 184.

78. For Dickinson's draft, see the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers. For the Adams draft with analysis, see Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 4:260–78.

79. Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776, in Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1:370; and John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776, in Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1:382.

80. Dickinson's full draft of the Articles of Confederation and notes are in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers.

81. John Dickinson, "Arguments Against the Independance of These Colonies," July 1, 1776, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Simon Gratz Autograph Collection.

82. John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, vol. 2, *June 1776–March 1778* (Belknap Press, 1963), 30.

83. Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, vol. 8, *1777: May 22–October 2* (Government Printing Office, 1907), 688–89.

84. John Adams to Abigail Adams, September 8, 1777, in Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 2:337–38.

85. See also Jane E. Calvert, "Thomas Paine, Quakerism, and the Limits of Religious Liberty in the American Revolution," in *Selected Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Jane E. Calvert (Yale University Press, 2014), 602–29.

86. Peter C. Messer, "'A Species of Treason & Not the Least Dangerous Kind': The Treason Trials of Abraham Carlisle and John Roberts," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 123, no. 4 (1999): 303–32, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20093317.

87. Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 5:434; *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 2:252; Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, vol. 7, *1777: January 1–May 21* (Government Printing Office, 1907), 85; and Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, vol. 9, *1777: October 3–December 31* (Government Printing Office, 1907), 880.

88. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 4:252–53.

89. Quoted in Bernstein, *The Education of John Adams*, 119–20.

90. Bernstein, *The Education of John Adams*, 118, 138.

91. Richard Alan Ryerson, "An Education in American Aristocracy, 1775–1783," in *John Adams's Republic*, 232–69.

92. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 3:316.

93. "From John Adams to *Boston Patriot*, 1809," Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5491.

94. When Adams was in France two years later, he requested that Abigail send him a copy. John Adams to Abigail Adams, June 16, 1778, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield and Marc Friedlaender, vol. 3, *April 1778–September 1780* (Belknap Press, 1973), 44.

95. John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 10, 1776, in Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 2:42.

96. Samuel Chase to John Dickinson, September 29, 1776, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers; and Thomas Stone to John Dickinson, September 1776, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers.

97. Samuel Chase to John Dickinson, October 12, 1776, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers; and Samuel Chase to John Dickinson, October 19, 1776, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers. Research has not yet been undertaken to determine Dickinson's influence.

98. John Dickinson to the Council of Safety, January 21, 1777, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers.

99. John Dickinson, manumission deed, May 12, 1777, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, R. R. Logan Collection of John Dickinson Papers. See Calvert, *Penman of the Founding*, 282–86, 303–4, 346–47.

100. Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (Yale University Press, 1911), 1:87, 153; and Jane E. Calvert, "An Expansive Conception of Rights: The Abolitionism of John Dickinson," in *When in the Course of Human Events: 1776 at Home, Abroad, and in American Memory*, ed. Will R. Jordan (Mercer University Press, 2018), 43n79.

101. John Dickinson to George Logan, January 16, 1802, Library Company of Philadelphia, John Dickinson Papers.

102. A Farmer [George Logan], *Letters Addressed to the Yeomanry of the United States* [. . .] (Philadelphia, 1791).

103. John Dickinson, *A Caution; Or, Reflections on the Present Contest Between France and Britain* (Philadelphia, 1798).

104. See Calvert, *Penman of the Founding*, esp. chaps. 13–15.

105. John Dickinson to Thomas Jefferson, June 27, 1801, Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson Papers.

106. John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 12, 1813, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, ed. J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton University Press, 2009), 6:612.

107. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 25, 1899.

4

Founded in Revelation, and in Reason Too

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

It is a famous story of a conversation that changed the world. As part of preparations for a July 2, 1776, vote on Richard Henry Lee's resolution declaring the American states "absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown," the Continental Congress created a committee consisting of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman to produce a document making the case for independence.[1] According to Adams's autobiography, Jefferson had urged Adams to write the first draft of the document. But Adams refused and urged Jefferson to take up his pen instead:

> This I declined and gave several reasons for declining. 1. That he was a Virginian and I a Massachusettensian. 2. that he was a southern Man and I a northern one. 3. That I had been so obnoxious for my early and constant Zeal in promoting the Measure, that any draught of mine, would undergo a more severe Scrutiny and Criticism in Congress, than one of his composition. 4thly and lastly and that would be reason enough if there were no other, I had a great Opinion of the Elegance of his pen and none at all of my own.[2]

This aspect of the tale is well-known, and Adams's faith in the elegance of Jefferson's pen has certainly been vindicated. Anyone else charged with a defense of the Lee Resolution might have made the Declaration of Independence entirely about the misdeeds of the British government. But Jefferson included in the Declaration not only an airing of grievances

but also, and much more enduringly, a statement of the American creed, which asserts, "All men are created equal." Abraham Lincoln would powerfully capture how Jefferson had fulfilled the task with which Adams had charged him:

> All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.[3]

In other words, Adams's positive "opinion" of Jefferson's pen would change the world.

Much less recounted, however, is a passage that occurs just a bit earlier in Adams's autobiography. There Adams describes his experience with Jefferson up to the point they were assigned to the Declaration committee:

> Mr. Jefferson had been now about a Year a Member of Congress, but had attended his Duty in the House but a very small part of the time and when there had never spoken in public: and during the whole Time I satt with him in Congress, I never heard him utter three Sentences together. *The most of a Speech he ever made in my hearing was a gross insult on Religion, in one or two Sentences, for which I gave him immediately the Reprehension, which he richly merited*.[4] (Emphasis added.)

Thus began one of the most interesting and important friendships in American history. Moreover, this one eminently believable anecdote gives us a framework within which to study the relationship between these two men and the meaning of John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence,* one of the most renowned paintings of the founding era.

Source: John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence,* 1818, oil on canvas, 12 × 8 ft., Capitol Rotunda, Washington, DC, https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/declaration-independence.

The image Trumbull gives us is often misunderstood. Many official descriptions of this scene assume it is depicting the day the Declaration was approved. But in truth, Trumbull gives us the events not of July 4, 1776, but rather of June 28, when Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Livingston, and Sherman presented the Declaration to the Continental Congress. Trumbull did more than paint these five figures. He resolved to include all members of the Congress, provided he could draw their faces himself or find an accurate depiction of them. His aim was to memorialize the Declaration's unveiling for posterity. As his catalog ultimately described the artist's endeavor,

> Where any one was dead, he should be careful to copy the finest portrait that could be obtained; but . . . in case of death, where no portrait could be obtained, (and there were many such instances, for, anterior to the Revolution, the arts had

> been very little attended to, except in one or two of the cities,) he should by no means admit any ideal representation, lest, it being known that some such were to be found in the painting, a doubt of the truth of others should be excited in the minds of posterity; and that, in short, absolute authenticity should be attempted, as far as it could be obtained. . . .
>
> . . . Mr. Adams was painted in London; Mr. Jefferson in Paris; Mr. Hancock and Samuel Adams in Boston; Mr. Edward Rutledge in Charleston, South Carolina; Mr. Wythe at Williamsburgh, in Virginia; Mr. Bartlett at Exeter, in New Hampshire, &c. &c. &c.[5]

Trumbull crisscrossed Europe and America, capturing forever the image of most of the Declaration's signers. What he put together is a small jewel of a painting that hangs today in Yale University's art museum. Due to the effort, research, and time put into it, it is utterly unlike any other painting from the founding era and perhaps in the history of art. It took some 35 years for Trumbull to fill in all the founders' faces. As he came close to completing the painting, following the War of 1812, he sought to create a larger version of the work that would be hung in the US Capitol rotunda along with other patriotic paintings, turning it into a shrine to the American idea. Lobbying Congress for the expenditure, he turned to the surviving founders to offer an endorsement for his effort.

The oldest former president still living, and one of the men most at the center of the developments of 1776, was not sure he approved of the idea. The problem with art, Adams wrote Trumbull, is that it could capture only a specific scene, but the story of the Revolution was that of a complex layering of events and individuals. After all, Adams wrote, the origin of the Revolution lay with the Sons of Liberty, Sam Adams, and many acts and stands that had led up to independence. But if the painting was to be made, Trumbull should try as hard as he could to attain accuracy. "Let not our Posterity be deluded by fictions under pretence of poetical or graphical Licenses," Adams concluded.[6]

Meanwhile, another founder thought the project an excellent idea. If we did not allow for artistic license, Jefferson reflected, "the talent of imagination would be banished from the art, taste and judgment in composition would be of no value, and the mechanical copyist of matter of fact would be on a footing with the first painter."[7] Jefferson's attitude was unsurprising, as the original painting had been his suggestion when Trumbull visited him in Paris. While serving as the American ambassador to France, Jefferson became caught up in the ferment preceding the French Revolution. He concluded that the words he had written in the Declaration of Independence might have lasting import beyond America and was beginning to realize that his authoring a document declaring that all men are created equal might be the most important thing he would ever do. And so he urged Trumbull to paint the events of 1776 as not only a series of military battles but also a revolution in ideas, and to therefore mark the Declaration as a seminal event.

It is thus no surprise that Trumbull made Jefferson a star of the painting that resulted. Though all five members of the Declaration committee are depicted, Jefferson is at the center of the scrum. As the art historian Paul Staiti explains, Trumbull's painting would stress three facts: "That the document was the legislative and philosophic centerpiece of the Revolution, that Jefferson was its author, and that if a single Founder ought to be identified with the modern concept of inalienable human rights, that person also was Jefferson."[8] Trumbull gives us a painting wherein his inspiration, the author of the Declaration, stands out; resplendent in a red vest, Jefferson alone grasps the document presented to the Continental Congress. At first glance, the painting celebrates him as the author of America itself.

But does it? Is that really the message of this work of art? Most great works of art give us one focal point in a painting; this one has two. As the historian David McCullough noted, while Jefferson is prominent, Adams actually stands dead center in the painting.[9] While every other founder's physique is partially obscured, Adams's can be seen in its entirety. Jefferson is the center of the Committee of Five, but Adams

is the center of the canvas. Jefferson wrote the Declaration, Trumbull seems to be saying, but Adams stood at the center of what happened. Adams got the Congress to pass the all-important unanimous vote for the Declaration.

This is as it should be. For the truth is that Adams and Jefferson serve as embodiments of different perspectives on the metaphysical meaning of the events of the founding. Indeed, it is only when we recognize the nature of their differing but equally essential contributions to the American Revolution, shaped by their profound difference when it comes to faith, that we can begin to understand their profoundly divergent interpretations of the founding and of God's role in it. And it is only with this understanding that we can comprehend how the complexity of Trumbull's painting embodies the complexity of America itself.

A Portrait of Two Personalities

Let us begin by comparing the two individuals involved. Adams and Jefferson truly were, in Joseph J. Ellis's words, "the odd couple of the American Revolution." As "the highly combustible, ever combative, mile-a-minute talker," Adams stood in sharp contrast to "Jefferson, the always cool and self-contained enigma."[10] In *The Declaration of Independence*, Trumbull strikingly captures the essence of their opposing personalities. "Where Jefferson stands in an elegant écarté, his right heel picked up," Staiti notes, "Adams looks like a bulldog, feet flat and right arm akimbo."[11] It was Jefferson who composed the words of the Declaration that changed the world, but it was Adams who had, time and time again, made the case for independence and for breaking with Britain.

In their religious dogmas and doctrines they may have seemed similar, as they both called themselves Unitarians. But they were actually quite different. Jefferson was essentially a deist. In Jefferson's scheme, the historian Richard A. Samuelson explains, "God was the creator of the universe, . . . but the idea that God was an active presence in the world he

dismissed as mere superstition."[12] While also a great believer in human reason, Adams had been reared in the Congregationalist church and held strongly to the importance of religion in forming a moral life. This was especially true for democracies. If the power of the state was to be vested in the will of the people, then nothing prevented the populace from running morally amok except its own self-restraint, making religion necessary. In a letter as president, Adams wrote, "We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by morality and Religion. . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."[13] Jefferson, in contrast, once wrote that he believed the American mission to be "to shew by example the sufficiency of human reason for the care of human affairs."[14]

As Adams discovered to his great surprise at the Continental Congress, while Jefferson single-mindedly defended religious liberty, he nevertheless looked down on those who embraced a traditional faith. As a policy, Jefferson reflected, "I . . . rarely permit myself to speak on" religion. When he did, it was "never but in a reasonable society."[15] By this he meant, as Gordon S. Wood puts it, that he would say what he truly thought about faith only "among friends who shared his derisive view of organized religion." While Jefferson in private company would often "mock religious feelings," "Adams always retained a respect for the religiosity of people that Jefferson never had."[16]

Wood further notes that Jefferson differed from Adams in his attitude regarding religion's role in a democratic society. In the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, which Jefferson drafted in the 1770s, he had insisted that "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry."[17] Most Americans of Jefferson's time, Wood notes, rejected this view. On matters of religion, the America of the founding was the most tolerant nation on earth. Yet nearly all Americans "continued to believe that religion was essential for the maintenance of order and morality in society, which was especially important for a republic."[18]

In fact, the differences between Adams and Jefferson may be best reflected in their very different descriptions of the Hebraic tradition. For Jefferson, biblical Judaism and its doctrine of hundreds of divinely inspired commandments was the epitome of all that was wrong with religion. "The whole religion of the Jew," Jefferson wrote in a letter in 1820, "was founded in the belief of divine inspiration. The fumes of the most disordered imaginations were recorded in their religious code, as special communications of the Deity." Echoing a sentiment publicly expressed by Thomas Paine in his *Age of Reason*, Jefferson privately reflected that Moses had presented to Israel as an object of worship "a Being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust." "Moses," he added, "had bound the Jews to many idle ceremonies, mummeries, and observances, of no effect towards producing the social utilities which constitute the essence of virtue."[19] He showed similar disdain regarding rabbinic texts. As part of their ongoing correspondence regarding religion at the end of their lives, Jefferson, citing an English abridgment of a German history of philosophy he had just read, incorrectly informed Adams that "ethics were so little studied among the Jews, that, in their whole compilation called the Talmud, there is only one treatise on moral subjects."[20]

In contrast, as Adams believed religion was essential to a moral society, in his view the people that should be most credited for providing the foundation of civilization was the one that first introduced biblical monotheism. In what is for Jews a justifiably famous letter to the Dutch immigrant and intellectual François Adriaan Van der Kemp, Adams revealed that

> in Spight of Bolingbroke and Voltaire I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize Men than any other Nation. If I were an Atheist and believed in blind eternal Fate, I should Still believe that Fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential Instrument for civilizing the Nations. If I were an Atheist of the other Sect, who believe or pretend to believe that all is ordered by Chance, I Should believe that Chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate, to all Mankind the

> Doctrine of a Supreme intelligent wise, almighty Sovereign of the Universe, which I believe to be the great essential Principle of all Morality and consequently of all Civilization.[21]

Responding to Jefferson's negative assessment of the rabbinic moral tradition, Adams similarly noted that he wished he had the time to actually engage with the entire Jewish Talmudic tradition:

> To examine the Mishna Gemara Kabbala Jezirah, Sohar Cosri and Talmud of the Hebrews would require the life of Methuselah. . . . 20 Cartloads of Hebrew Books were burnt in France; and how many times 20 Cartloads were destroyed in the other Kingdoms? The Talmud of Babylon and that of Jerusalem were composed from 120 to 500 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. . . . How many proofs of the Corruptions of Christianity might We find in the Passages burnt?[22]

For Adams, rabbinic works might illuminate errors made by Christian theologians. This may seem a small matter, but it is actually quite striking. Like Jefferson, Adams was not an orthodox Christian. Yet Adams believed it was precisely the *diversity* of faiths flourishing in America that would sustain society while allowing for the pursuit of truth.

We have, then, two famous founders, both accurately placed by Trumbull at the heart of the story of the Revolution, with very different approaches to faith itself. We can now study the different ways their divergent worldviews influenced their defenses of the revolutionary cause in the years leading up to independence.

A Journey of Faith and Freedom

Long before they joined a committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, Adams and Jefferson had each made the case for American liberty

and the cause against Britain. Yet the cases they made, and the worldviews they expressed, differed dramatically. Adams was the descendant of Puritans who had settled Massachusetts. While his embrace of Christian doctrine was much more limited than his ancestors', their example was a polestar in Adams's understanding of the unfolding of American liberty and of the role of the divine within it.

This religious influence can be seen in Adams's once well-known, and now largely forgotten, response to the passage of the 1765 Stamp Act, published originally in *The Boston Gazette* and later reprinted as "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law." In this work, Adams does not merely criticize a piece of legislation; he advances a philosophical and theological interpretation of American history from its early origins, with an emphasis on the men and women of faith who fled England for the New World. For Adams, this was quite personal, given his connection to the Puritans, whose valor and vision he championed in his composition. In his telling, the Reformation was the start of a series of providential events that included the resistance of religious dissenters in England to the Stuart dynasty. Europe, in Adams's view, was suffering under political and ecclesiastical tyranny

> till GOD, in his benign providence, raised up the champions, who began and conducted the *reformation*. From the time of the reformation, to the first settlement of *America*, knowledge gradually spread in Europe, but especially in *England*; and in proportion as *that* increased and spread among the people, *ecclesiastical* and *civil* tyranny, which I use as synonimous expressions, for the *cannon* and *feudal* laws, seem to have lost their strength and weight. The people grew more and more sensible of the wrong that was done them, by these systems; more and more impatient under it; and determined at all hazards to rid themselves of it; till, at last, under the *execrable* race of the *Steuarts*, the struggle between the people and the confederacy aforesaid of temporal and spiritual tyranny, became formidable, violent and bloody.[23]

Adams saw his ancestors as initiators in a story of liberty, a story that fused faith and freedom:

> IT was this great struggle, that peopled America. It was not religion *alone*, as is commonly supposed; but it was a love of *universal Liberty*, and an hatred, a dread, an horror of the infernal confederacy, before described, that projected, conducted, and accomplished the settlement of America.
>
> IT was a resolution formed, by a sensible people, I mean the *Puritans*, almost in despair. They had become intelligent in general, and many of them learned. . . . This people had been so vexed, and tortured by the powers of those days, for no other crime than their knowledge, and their freedom of enquiry and examination, and they had so much reason to despair of deliverance from those miseries, on that side the ocean; that they at last resolved to fly to the *wilderness* for refuge, from the temporal and spiritual principalities and powers, and plagues, and scourges, of their *native* country.[24] (Emphasis in original.)

Thus, an exodus—a biblical image that would so profoundly influence America—began, for Adams, with the Puritan journey. Although Adams's own doctrinal beliefs were different from those of his ancestors, he viewed the revolutionary events that were unfolding as part of a providential, divinely directed drama:

> Religious to some degree of enthusiasm it may be admitted they were; but this can be no peculiar derogation from their character . . . the ends to which it was directed, far from being a reproach to them, was greatly to their honour: for I believe it will be found universally true, that no great enterprize, for the honour or happiness of mankind, was ever achieved, without a large mixture of that noble infirmity. . . . *It was founded in revelation, and in reason too; It was consistent with the principles, of the*

> *best, and greatest, and wisest legislators of antiquity*.[25] (Emphasis added.)

For Adams, the liberties that Americans sought in the mid-18th century were those that his ancestors had already established in the 17th, rights that the earliest Americans had taken for granted as gifts from God:

> Be it remembred, however, that liberty must at all hazards be supported. We have a right to it, derived from our Maker. But if we had not, our fathers have earned, and bought it for us, at the expence of their ease, their estates, their pleasure, and their blood. And liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right from the frame of their nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator who does nothing in vain, has given them understandings, and a desire to know. . . . Rulers are no more than attorneys, agents and trustees for the people; and if the cause, the interest and trust is insidiously betray'd, or wantonly trifled away, the people have a right to revoke the authority, that they themselves have deputed, and to constitute abler and better agents, attorneys and trustees.[26]

Also for Adams, the Puritans' journey for faith and freedom, grounded "in revelation, and in reason too," was the beginning of America. Moreover, the root of America's tradition of religious resistance was grounded in rights that were "derived from our Maker." The burgeoning Revolution taking place a century later was itself a continuation of America's original settlement. Adams and his compatriots were the political and spiritual successors to the Pilgrims and Puritans, playing their role in the sacred drama that the previous generations had set in motion. Adams would later state this interpretation even more explicitly in a passage from his diary in 1765 that was added to a later published version of the "Dissertation": "I always consider the settlement of America with

Reverence and Wonder—as the Opening of a grand scene and Design in Providence, for the Illumination of the Ignorant and the Emancipation of the slavish Part of Mankind all over the Earth."[27] The arrival of religious pilgrims in America was itself providential, and, for Adams, it set the stage for the providential events in which he was to play so important a part.

Adams's "Puritan" perspective on American history permeates his description of a profoundly religious moment in the lead-up to independence that, in his view, set the stage for the unity of the American cause. In a letter to his wife, Abigail, Adams described how as the First Continental Congress gathered in September 1774, it was proposed that those assembled begin their deliberations with a prayer. Adams reported that several members opposed this motion, including John Jay, who argued that those attending were "so divided in religious Sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Aanabaptists, some Presbyterians and some Congregationalists, so that We could not join in the same Act of Worship." To this, Sam Adams stood up and declared that "he was no Bigot, and could hear a Prayer from a Gentleman of Piety and Virtue, who was at the same Time a Friend to his Country." Accordingly, an Anglican priest by the name of Jacob Duché was summoned, who appended a personal prayer to a reading of Psalm 35: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me." Adams described to Abigail the impact that the psalm and prayer had:

> You must remember this was the next Morning after we heard the horrible Rumour, of the Cannonade of Boston.—I never saw a greater Effect upon an Audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that Morning.
>
> After this Mr. Duche, unexpected to every Body struck out into an extemporary Prayer, which filled the Bosom of every Man present. I must confess I never heard a better Prayer or one, so well pronounced. Episcopalian as he is,

> Dr. Cooper himself never prayed with such fervour, such Ardor, such Earnestness and Pathos, and in Language so elegant and sublime—for America, for the Congress, for The Province of Massachusetts Bay, and especially the Town of Boston. It has had an excellent Effect upon every Body here.
>
> I must beg you to read that Psalm.[28]

We can overlook the irony that Duché would eventually embrace the Loyalist cause. Several important lessons can be gleaned from the episode Adams describes in his letter. First, there is the way a passage from the Hebrew Bible, describing a divine defense from one's enemies, served to unite the members of the Congress who, to some, seemed so doctrinally divided. For the philosopher Michael Novak, this small story reflects the role that Jewish scripture played in the images invoked during the Revolution:

> Practically all American Christians erected their main arguments about political life from materials in the Jewish Testament. . . . In national debates, lest their speech be taken as partisan, Christian leaders usually avoided the idioms of rival denominations—Puritan, Quaker, Congregationalist, Episcopal, Unitarian, Methodist, and Universalist. The idiom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a religious *lingua franca* for the founding generation. . . . The language of Judaism came to be the central language of the American metaphysic—the unspoken background to a special American vision of nature, history and the destiny of the human race.[29]

Of all the themes from the Hebrew Bible that sustained the founders, perhaps most central was the notion of providence as made manifest in political events. Whereas pagan antiquity saw time as cyclical, the Jews introduced the notion of history as linear, providential, and purposeful. "History," Novak adds, "in this sense—open, purposive, contingent in

liberty—is not a Greek or Roman idea. It is Hebraic; its source springs from the Biblical historians and prophets." Without Hebraic scriptural insistence on providence, Novak argues, "the founding generation of Americans would have had little heart for the War of Independence. They would have had no ground for believing that their seemingly unlawful rebellion actually fulfilled the will of God—and suited the laws of nature and nature's God."[30]

All this is eloquent, important, and true, but Adams's tale of the first Congress is instructive in another powerful way: The manner in which this prayerful moment formed a unified group despite its members' differences reflected the elements of the biblical compact known as a covenant. As the theologian Richard Niebuhr noted, what sets the covenantal compact apart from the standard notion of the social contract is that the application of biblical language to a polity allows it to understand itself in a way that is "neither purely natural nor merely contractual, based on common interest." Covenant, Niebuhr explains, allows for "the binding together in one body politic of persons who assumed through unlimited promise responsibility to and for each other and for the common laws, under God." Covenantal moments allow for members of a polity to embrace not only unity but also destiny, because "in the covenant conception the essence of freedom does not lie in the liberty of choice among goods, but in the ability to commit oneself for the future to a cause."[31]

The scene in Adams's letter to Abigail, then, sets the stage for what was to come. "It was in America," Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks noted, "that covenantal politics received its most complete expression."[32] Congress's gathering in prayer as Psalm 35 was read aloud was, as Novak notes, a sign of the singular nature of the American founding. With this in mind, we can turn to that very different founder and study how the document he wrote became the covenantal document that we call the Declaration of Independence today.

Composing the Declaration

Like Adams in Massachusetts, Jefferson had given his fellow Virginians his own written reflections following the 1774 Intolerable Acts. He originally intended for his moral and political case for resistance to parliamentary excesses to serve as instructions for Virginia's delegates to the First Continental Congress. These notes were later published (without Jefferson's consent) as *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. But as Wood notes, these reflections were utterly unlike anything Adams would have composed. Jefferson, Wood writes,

> invoked the myth that represented the most alienated strain of Whig or anti-establishment thinking in the eighteenth century—the idea of a golden Anglo-Saxon age of pure liberty and equality that existed before the imposition of the Norman yoke in 1066.[33]

For Jefferson, the original colonists in America were political parallels to these ancient Englishmen, and they had retained their natural rights over which Parliament had no power:

> Our ancestors, before their emigration to America, were the free inhabitants of the British dominions in Europe, and possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness. That their Saxon ancestors had, under this universal law, in like manner left their native wilds and woods in the north of Europe, had possessed themselves of the island of Britain, then less charged with inhabitants, and had established there that system of laws which has so long been the glory and protection of that

> country. Nor was ever any claim of superiority or dependence asserted over them by that mother country from which they had migrated; and were such a claim made, it is believed that his majesty's subjects in Great Britain have too firm a feeling of the rights derived to them from their ancestors, to bow down the sovereignty of their state before such visionary pretensions.[34]

"Just as the Saxons held their lands free of any feudal obligations before the Norman Conquest of 1066," Wood explains, "and owed no allegiance to the German mother country from which they had migrated, so too, Jefferson suggested, did the American colonists own their lands outright and exist free of any allegiance to England."[35] This argument put forward by Jefferson made no mention of providence, faith, or the Bible. It is Lockean in nature, without any political or religious reference to the early Puritan settlers of the continent.

In his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke famously referred to America as an example of the state of nature that lay at the heart of his social contract theory: "In the beginning all the world was America, and more so than that is now."[36] Jefferson similarly argued that in the beginning, America was America, and its inhabitants retained rights over which Parliament had no power. Unlike Adams, Jefferson makes no mention of providence, ignoring all notion of the American story as a divinely directed drama. But like Adams's, Jefferson's early writings during the Revolution foreshadowed what was to come.

Charged by Adams with producing a "draught" of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Jefferson's first attempt referenced the Lockean "laws of nature & of nature's god" but made no mention of even the Creator of the world:

> We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independant, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness.[37]

As a result of Franklin or Adams's suggestion or Jefferson's own initiative, the draft of the Declaration that the Committee of Five presented to the Continental Congress referenced rights endowed by the "Creator." But the document's conclusion made no reference to God at all:

> We therefore the Representatives of the United states of America in General Congress assembled, do, in the name & by authority of the good people of these states, reject and renounce all allegiance & subjection to the kings of Great Britain, & all others who may hereafter claim by, through, or under them. . . . And for the support of this declaration, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, & our sacred honor.[38]

This passage went through several revisions, and the most important were made by the members of the Congress. The men assembled at what would become Independence Hall, whom Trumbull would later immortalize, insisted on adding a biblically inspired reference to the conclusion of the Declaration:

> We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, *appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions*, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States. . . . And for the support of this Declaration, *with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence,* we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor. (Emphasis added.)

For those assembled, these additions were not mere rhetoric. They had the effect of transforming the document into one of covenantal nature, enabling the sacred binding of the American people as Niebuhr described.

Jefferson was famously in agony at every edit made to his draft, but as the historian Pauline Maier reflects, these edits captured the very feelings of the American populace. Congress, she writes,

> added two references to God, which were conspicuously missing in Jefferson's draft, where God appeared only as the author of nature's laws and the endower of natural rights, and honor alone was "sacred." At the start of the final paragraph Congress inserted an appeal "to the supreme judge of the world" to affirm "the rectitude of our intentions," which echoed similar provisions in several state and local resolutions on Independence, and nearer the end of the document it also referred to the delegates' "firm reliance on the protection of divine providence." Americans held strong religious beliefs in 1776, and the Declaration was meant to state the convictions of the country's "good people." The delegates retained, however, Jefferson's concluding sentences, including its memorable mutual pledge of "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."[39]

As for Adams, while it may not have been he who insisted on placing a reference to providence in the text of the Declaration, there is no question that this edit expressed his own devout feelings at the moment. On July 3, 1776, he wrote of God and providence to the woman who knew him best and to whom he could bare his soul:

> It is the Will of Heaven, that the two Countries should be sundered forever. It may be the Will of Heaven that America shall suffer Calamities still more wasting and Distresses yet more dreadfull. If this is to be the Case, it will have this good Effect, at least: it will inspire Us with many Virtues, which We have not, and correct many Errors, Follies, and Vices, which threaten to disturb, dishonour, and destroy Us. . . . The People will have unbounded Power. And the People are extreamly addicted to

> Corruption and Venality, as well as the Great.—I am not without Apprehensions from this Quarter. *But I must submit all my Hopes and Fears, to an overruling Providence, in which, unfashionable as the Faith may be, I firmly believe.*[40] (Emphasis added.)

Whether the painter so intended, we can rightly see Adams's profile in Trumbull's painting as an avatar of a perspective on the founding that balanced and added to that of Jefferson. It is also significant that Trumbull went out of his way to ensure that the faces of all the signatories appear on a painting depicting the presentation of the Declaration. In having the courage to place their names on the parchment, they were, as is often said, signing their own death warrant. But the presence of their profiles on the painting is more than a mere tribute to the idea that those assembled had to hang together, lest they otherwise all hang separately. The truth is that the Continental Congress belongs on a masterwork celebrating the Declaration because without its members' edits, the Declaration would not be the covenantal document that we know it to be and would therefore not be an expression of how faith drove the unfolding of the Revolution.

The Vindication of John Adams

Adams's and Jefferson's very different approaches to American independence were later made manifest in their responses to another revolution, which was much more secular in nature. Jefferson saw the French Revolution as the natural successor to the American. Adams, in contrast, was the closest in America to embodying Edmund Burke, emphasizing that France unmoored from religion would devolve to anarchy and mob violence.

Adams believed in the universality of human rights and celebrated their application beyond the United States. However, France had overthrown not only its king but its entire religious system and installed a strict secularism lacking the notion of human beings created in the image of God. Adams argued that what would result was lawlessness, the suffering of

the innocent, and ultimately tyranny. This he expressed in his own 1791 reflections on the French Revolution, known as the *Discourses on Davila*. "Is there a possibility," he wrote,

> that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies, and that this *all* is without a father? Is this the way to make man, as man, an object of respect? Or is it to make murder itself as indifferent as . . . the swallowing of mites on a morsel of cheese?[41]

Meanwhile, Jefferson praised the revolution and said that "rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated."[42] He added to James Monroe that "all the old spirit of 1776[] is rekindling."[43] But Adams's fears about France were realized and vindicated following the Reign of Terror.

Writing about his Puritan ancestors as a young man, Adams had argued that New England was "founded in revelation, and in reason too." With the hindsight of history, it is the union of religion and reason that marks the American Revolution and sets it apart from other significant revolutions in modernity. Rabbi Sacks put it this way:

> There have been four revolutions in modern times: the British and the American, and the French and the Russian. In Britain and America the source of inspiration was the Hebrew Bible. In France and Russia it was the great alternative to the Bible, namely philosophy. The theorist of the French Revolution was Jean-Jacques Rousseau; of the Russian, Karl Marx. The contrast between them is vivid. Britain and America succeeded in creating a free society, not without civil war, but at least without tyranny and terror. The French and Russian revolutions began with a dream of utopia and ended with a nightmare of bloodshed and the suppression of human rights. . . .

> Why did Britain and America succeed where France and Russia failed? The explanation is surely complex but much—perhaps all—turns on how a society answers the question: who is the ultimate sovereign, God or man? The British and Americans gave the first answer, the French and Russian revolutionaries the second. For the British and American architects of liberty, God was the supreme power. All authority was therefore subject to the transcendental demands of the moral law. . . . When human beings arrogate supreme power to themselves, politics loses its sole secure defense of freedom. . . . Societies that exile God lead to the eclipse of man.[44]

We can therefore see in the complexity of Trumbull's painting a reminder of Jefferson's impact on America but also the importance of Adams's perspective. Interestingly, the complexity on the canvas reflects Trumbull's own experiences. As a young artist in England in the 1780s, he had spent a great deal of time in the home of the American ambassador in Grosvenor Square. He loved Abigail Adams, and he loved the Adams children. But John Adams he thought an insufferable bore. For this young man in the prime of life, Adams appeared too serious. He was never jocular and never ready to relax and have a good time. "There is too much constraint, too much of the great and the wise to admit anything sporting," Trumbull wrote. "'Tis well enough when business presses, but even business should be confined as much as possible within the Closet & there is a time when 'tis ridiculous to be wise."[45]

Yet later, Trumbull was turned off at the way Jefferson's circle derided religion and came to see the wisdom of Adams's view. As the Federalists began to disappear and the Jeffersonians conquered the country, and as France devolved into anarchy and tyranny, the older, more mature Trumbull began to understand and appreciate the wisdom of the man he once snidely dismissed. "It has been seen, that in Europe I had been on terms of confidence with Mr. Jefferson; this continued for some time," Trumbull noted in his memoir. But after 1789, "my whole soul revolted from the

atrocities of France, while he approved or apologized for all. He opposed Washington—I revered him—and a coldness gradually succeeded, until in 1793, he invited me to dine."[46] This dinner set the stage for a falling out forever between Trumbull and Jefferson.

This episode is fascinating for those interested in the story of American religion, for it reflects, in a small way, the unusual diversity of the religious and intellectual makeup of the early republic. In 1793, Jefferson was George Washington's secretary of state, but he was about to resign and head home to Virginia, where he could lay the groundwork for his own political party. Two other important guests joined Trumbull for dinner at Jefferson's Philadelphia home. One was David Salisbury Franks, the highest-ranking Jew to have served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. The other was William Branch Giles, a Virginia senator whom Trumbull had once taken to task for insulting comments about Adams's essays.[47]

Now, in Jefferson's home, Giles decided to take revenge. According to Trumbull's recollections, in the discussion before dinner Giles began to attack "the puritanical ancestry and character of New England." By this, Trumbull meant that he was attacking the religion and traditional beliefs with which New Englanders at the time were associated. As a Connecticut-born descendant of Puritans himself, Trumbull hoped that with dinner the subject would change, but alas,

> the company was hardly seated at table, when he renewed his attack with increased asperity, and proceeded so far at last, as to ridicule the character, conduct, and doctrines of the divine founder of our religion—Jefferson in the mean time, smiling and nodding approbation on Mr. Giles, while the rest of the company silently left me and my defense to our fate; until at length my friend, David Franks, (first cashier of the bank of the United States,) took up the argument on my side.[48]

We thus have the strange scenario in which a senator from Virginia, with the smiling approval of the secretary of state, is engaging in an attack

on Christianity, and the only one who joins Trumbull in its defense is a Jew named David Franks. This impressed Trumbull, who described the scene:

> Thinking this a fair opportunity for evading further conversation on this subject, I turned to Mr. Jefferson and said, "Sir, this is a strange situation in which I find myself; in a country professing Christianity, and at a table with Christians, as I supposed, I find my religion and myself attacked with severe and almost irresistible wit and raillery, and not a person to aid me in my defense, but my friend Mr. Franks, *who is himself a Jew*." For a moment, this attempt to parry the discussion appeared to have some effect; but Giles soon returned to the attack, with renewed virulence, and burst out with—"It is all a miserable delusion and priestcraft; I do not believe one word of all they say about a future state of existence, and retribution for actions done here. I do not believe one word of a Supreme Being who takes cognizance of the paltry affairs of this world, and to whom we are responsible for what we do."[49] (Emphasis in original.)

Trumbull forever remembered this moment, he wrote, "as helping to elucidate the character of Mr. Jefferson," who "in nodding and smiling assent to all the virulence of his friend, Mr. Giles, . . . appeared to me to avow most distinctly, his entire approbation. From this time my acquaintance with Mr. Jefferson became cold and distant."[50]

This story stands today as a metaphor of sorts, proving that it is not only Jefferson's draft of the Declaration that embodies the making of America. Central to the story is what Novak calls the "Hebrew metaphysic" and the founders' embrace of providence, without which the Revolution would have had a very different character, without which the Declaration would have had a very different character, and without which America would have had a very different character.[51]

Adams, Jefferson, and the DNA of the United States

Trumbull's lack of love for Jefferson became known, and when he came to Congress proposing to produce a larger version of *The Declaration of Independence*, there were those who were concerned that Trumbull would make Jefferson less prominent than he was in the original. But they needn't have worried. Jefferson is, of course, celebrated in the larger painting that now hangs in the Capitol rotunda, and rightly so. For as Lincoln noted, it was he who enshrined in the Declaration the concept of equality at the heart of the American idea, transforming "a merely revolutionary document" into "a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."[52]

But Adams's warning to Trumbull that the American Revolution was more than Jefferson's drafting of the Declaration is worth bearing in mind as well. It is a lesson overlooked even by the most distinguished of scholars, who tend to celebrate Jefferson to the detriment of Adams. Wood concludes his description of Adams and Jefferson's friendship by invoking Lincoln's famous speech from July 10, 1858, wherein he described how those who did not descend from the generation of the founding can still become Americans:

> If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, . . . but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, . . . and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic

> hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.[53]

From this, Wood derives the following conclusion:

> As Lincoln grasped better than anyone, Jefferson offered Americans a set of beliefs that through the generations have supplied a bond that holds together the most diverse nation that history has ever known. Since now the whole world is in the United States, nothing but Jefferson's ideals can turn such an assortment of different individuals into the "one people" that the Declaration says we are. To be an American is not to be someone, but to believe in something. And that something is what Jefferson declared. That's why we honor Jefferson and not Adams.[54]

But surely that we ought not to honor Adams is not the conclusion we should draw. Jefferson's Declaration is indeed worthy of celebration, but the Continental Congress's faith in providence, a faith that lay at the heart of Adams's vision for America, remains bound up with the American story.

Indeed, Wood's own invocation of the 16th president allows us to see why this is so. If we wish to see how the Puritans' biblically inspired, providential faith lived on in American public life, if we search for an eloquent statement of the American story as a drama directed by what the Congress called, in its revision of the Declaration, the "Supreme Judge of the world," we need look no further than Lincoln's second inaugural address. This greatest speech in American history is less an inaugural than a sermon, illustrating the unique way religion and politics intersected in America. "It is impossible to imagine Lincoln's European contemporaries Napoleon III, Bismarck, Gambetta, Thiers, Garibaldi, Cavour, Marx, or Disraeli thinking in these terms," the historian Paul Johnson noted, while "Lincoln did so in the certainty that most of his countrymen and women could and did think along similar lines."[55] Adams believed that America

would be founded "in revelation, and in reason too," and Lincoln above all reflected this in American public life.

It is therefore gratifying that after Adams came to see the massive version of Trumbull's masterwork, he liked it and said his own picture "bore a general resemblance, but was not sufficiently corpulent." One relative of Adams's recalled that Adams

> seemed carried back to his prime of manhood, and to the most famous scene of his life, and he gave his warm approval to the picture as a correct representation of the Convention. "There is the door," said he, "through which Washington escaped when I nominated him as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army!"[56]

The two heroes of the painting capture the double helix of America's political DNA: Jefferson's embrace of the Enlightenment and Adams's emphasis on not only reason but also religion and tradition. These are elements that at times complement each other and at times are in tension with one another, but they make America what it always has been. For all the license in Trumbull's creation, it perfectly captures the complexity of the founding.

The American Revolution was a multifaceted event, combining faith and reason, enlightenment and tradition, noble ideals and tragic failures. Jefferson was a slaveholder who failed to uphold the very democratic ideals of equality that he gave the world; his own life is an embodiment of America's original failing. And yet he gave us words through which America changed the world, helping to define what it means to be an American. But many Americans came to understand that in their nation, there was an entire group of human beings whose equality had been cruelly denied. It was a *religious* awakening that led the abolitionist movement to take central stage in the years before the Civil War, just as religion and a faith in the providential unfolding of the American story played a central role in the fight for civil rights in the 20th century.

Adams's writings on America and France remind us that in the laudable and necessary pursuit of liberty and equality, it is religion that can sustain a movement for justice while also staving off lawlessness and anarchy. And so it has been at America's best moments. A hundred years after Gettysburg, Martin Luther King Jr. invoked not only Jefferson's words that all men are created equal but the biblical themes of a traditional spiritual: "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last."[57] As the legal scholar Stephen Carter explains,

> The religious convictions of the marchers, King often argued, gave them the courage and the power to remain civil, to remain focused, to shun immoral means in the quest for moral end. . . .
>
> A life without faith is a life without the most powerful language of sacrifice and aspiration the human race has ever known. . . . In the Western religious traditions, faith in God provides a *justification* for the equality that liberal philosophy assumes and cherishes but is often unable to defend.[58] (Emphasis in original.)

Or, to put it slightly differently, for America to endure, we need to remember not only Jefferson but also Adams—not only reason but also revelation.

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5

The American Revolutions of 1776

VINCENT PHILLIP MUÑOZ

Today, not everyone is eager to celebrate the Declaration of Independence and the political revolution it sparked. The political left has long been skeptical of 1776. Their critique is familiar: "All men are created equal" did not really mean all individuals, because the Constitution did not include African Americans or women, and the founders' alleged commitment to the rights of man was really a cover to advance their own economic interests.

While most, if not all, of these arguments have been addressed, a different criticism has emerged in recent years from the "post-liberal" right. Liberalism has failed because liberalism has succeeded, the political theorist Patrick Deneen alleges.[1] About natural rights, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes, "The truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns."[2] The political philosophy of the American founding, some on the right now claim, is untrue, erodes traditional morality, and undermines sound religious belief.

This chapter articulates an alternative interpretation of the Declaration of Independence, one that rejects the claims of both the progressive left and the post-liberal right. The American founding was indeed animated by a revolution in political thinking, but it was hostile to neither human equality nor religion. Moreover, the American founding's political philosophy of natural rights places limits on political authority in recognition of, and out of deference to, legitimate religious authority.

America's separation from Great Britain in 1776 set in motion three interrelated revolutions. In the Declaration of Independence and their writings on religious liberty, the Founding Fathers instituted a new

understanding of the foundations of political authority, advanced a new conception of government's purpose, and recognized the existence of religious truth and the legitimacy of religious authority. America's founding was animated by both the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion—a philosophical and practical achievement worth understanding and attempting to recover today.

The Foundations of Political Authority

America begins with the "self-evident" truth "that all men are created equal." But equal in what respects? How do we know? And what is the significance of that equality?

Just days before he died, Thomas Jefferson himself explained the meaning of equality in a remarkable letter to Roger Weightman, the mayor of Washington, DC. Jefferson had been invited to Philadelphia to take part in the nation's celebration of the Declaration's 50th anniversary. Regretfully explaining that he could not make the journey, the elder statesman wrote of the Declaration,

> May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, . . . and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.[3]

Jefferson continued:

> All eyes are opened, or opening to the rights of man.—The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few, booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.[4]

To understand Jefferson, we must work through his metaphor.[5] Horses, too, are not born with saddles on their backs, but common sense tells us that it is legitimate for us to break them, saddle them, and use them for our own purposes. We have reason and free will, which provide the capacity to deliberate about what is good, true, and just and then to make reflective choices informed by those deliberations. Animals do not. Animals' inferiority to human beings makes it legitimate for human beings to own horses.

If we follow Jefferson's metaphor, no human being stands in relation to another human being as human beings stand in relation to horses. One human's ownership of another or one person's subjection to another is contrary to how human beings have been created "by the grace of God." Thus, "all men are created equal" means that, by nature, no person is either a master or a slave. The capacity of all human beings—being naturally endowed with reason, free will, and moral judgment—to exercise dominion over their own lives makes us equal.[6] Given that men and women of all colors and all races equally share in the fundamental attributes of personhood, if we push Jefferson's metaphor to its logical conclusion, the Declaration's philosophical teaching about human equality necessarily includes the entire human race. As a deist who was suspicious of "monkish ignorance and superstition," Jefferson held that "the light of science" reveals this principle of human equality.[7]

Although perhaps only nominally Anglican, Founding Father James Wilson reached the same conclusion by further meditating on human nature in a manner shaped by a traditional understanding of natural law.[8] One of only six men to sign both the Declaration and the Constitution and one of the nation's first Supreme Court justices, Wilson is remembered today for his monumental *Lectures on Law*. Delivered at the College of Philadelphia between 1790 and 1792, Wilson's lectures established him as America's closest approximation to the English jurist William Blackstone.[9] Though the lectures cover an exhausting range of topics—a recently published two-volume edition comes in at well over 1,000 pages—Wilson conveys the essence of his teaching on human

equality in just a few paragraphs found in his 1791 lecture "Of Man, as a Member of Society":

> When we say, that all men are equal; we mean not to apply this equality to their virtues, their talents, their dispositions, or their acquirements. In all these respects, there is, and it is fit for the great purposes of society that there should be, great inequality among men.[10]

He continues:

> But however great the variety and inequality of men may be with regard to virtue, talents, taste, and acquirements; there is still one aspect, in which all men in society, previous to civil government, are equal. With regard to all, there is an equality in rights and in obligations. . . . The natural rights and duties of man belong equally to all. . . . By these laws, rights, natural or acquired, are confirmed, in the same manner, to all; to the weak and artless, their small acquisitions, as well as to the strong and artful, their large ones. If much labour employed entitles the active to great possessions, the indolent have a right, equally sacred, to the little possessions, which they occupy and improve.
>
> As in civil society, previous to civil government, all men are equal; so, in the same state, all men are free. In such a state, no one can claim, in preference to another, superiour right: in the same state, no one can claim over another superiour authority.[11]

All men are created equal, Wilson teaches, in their natural rights, which include the right to the fruits of one's labor and the right to exercise dominion over one's own life.

Equality in natural rights means equality in natural liberty. In his lecture "Of the Law of Nature," Wilson explains that the grounds of our equal

natural liberty lie in our nature as endowed by the Creator.[12] Later in "Of Man, as a Member of Society," he argues, "Nature has implanted in man the desire of his own happiness; she has inspired him with many tender affections towards others, especially in the near relations of life." Wilson connects our desire for our own happiness and the happiness of our loved ones to our "natural impulse[s]" and our "intellectual and moral powers." Given the constitution of human nature, he reasons,

> the undeniable consequence is, that [man] has a right to exert those powers for the accomplishment of those purposes, in such a manner, and upon such objects, as his inclination and judgment shall direct; provided he does no injury to others; and provided some publick interests do not demand his labours. This right is natural liberty. Every man has a sense of this right. Every man has a sense of the impropriety of restraining or interrupting it.

Wilson derives the moral imperative of human freedom from not only what is "low"—especially our passion for our own self-interest—but also what is "high" in human nature. "The right of natural liberty," Wilson continues,

> is suggested to us not only by the selfish parts of our constitution, but by our generous affections; and especially by our moral sense, which intimates to us, that in our voluntary actions consist our dignity and perfection.[13]

Reflecting on human nature—our natural desires, affections, inclinations, and moral and intellectual capacities—leads Wilson, like Jefferson, to the conclusion that human beings are all equally meant to be free.

It is worth emphasizing that Wilson's account of human nature and natural liberty is not Hobbesian. Unlike Thomas Hobbes, Wilson does not take natural liberty to mean we are free to do anything. Indeed,

immediately after articulating man's right of natural liberty, Wilson makes clear that this right does not include the freedom to commit moral wrongs. "The laws of nature are the measure and the rule," he writes, "they ascertain the limits and the extent of natural liberty."[14] Wilson articulates the framers' basic moral understanding of natural rights.[15]

Our natural desire for our own happiness and that of our friends and our capacity to pursue happiness in light of our ability to distinguish right from wrong mean that all human beings have a right to natural liberty. The right of natural liberty, like all natural rights, is bounded by the natural moral law. Indeed, our natural rights are part of the natural moral law, and thus the exercise of natural liberty does not include the right to act contrary to the natural moral law. Human beings by nature are both free and bounded: free to direct our own lives but bounded by a moral law we apprehend but do not create.

That all human beings by nature equally possess the right to exercise dominion over their own lives has a specific implication for the institution of legitimate political authority. Given that, by nature, no human being has a right to govern another, legitimate political authority arises only from consent. While it might be in every man's interest to be a citizen of a decent political order, given every individual's right of natural liberty, no man can be bounded to a specific political order except through his own consent.[16]

In his 1775 essay, "The Farmer Refuted," the young Alexander Hamilton connects both natural rights to natural law and consent to equality, explicitly rejecting Hobbes's contention that right and wrong exist only by convention. Like Wilson, Hamilton begins with human nature. The "supreme being," Hamilton writes, "endowed [man] with rational faculties, by the help of which, to discern and pursue such things, as were consistent with his duty and interest, and invested him with an inviolable right to personal liberty, and personal safety." Given our ability to apprehend moral truths and distinguish right from wrong, he says, we are morally obliged to follow the precepts of the law of nature. Given our natural equality, moreover, no man possesses "the least authority to command,

or exact obedience" from any other man, "except that which [arises] from the ties of consanguinity."[17]

The natural human condition is one of freedom, equality, and moral responsibility to the precepts of the natural law. Our equal natural liberty, Hamilton reasons, requires that

> the origin of all civil government, justly established, must be a voluntary compact, between the rulers and the ruled; and must be liable to such limitations, as are necessary for the security of the absolute rights of the latter; for what original title can any man or set of men have, to govern others, except their own consent? To usurp dominion over a people, in their own despite, or to grasp at a more extensive power than they are willing to entrust, is to violate that law of nature, which gives every man a right to his personal liberty; and can, therefore, confer no obligation to obedience.[18]

The idea that legitimate political authority requires the consent of the governed was the first revolution of 1776. The necessity of consent follows from the self-evident truths that all men are created equal in their natural liberty and possess natural authority over—and responsibility for—their own lives.

The principle of consent means that divine right is not sufficient for legitimate political rule. The political philosophy of the American founding rejects the idea that, in the ordinary course of human affairs, God directly appoints particular political rulers. As I discuss below, this philosophy does not reject divine right or divine authority as such. God may ordain that political authority exists and that men and women of faith be loyal subjects to those who govern justly.[19] God's providential design may even ordain that particular individuals govern in particular places and times in human history. But the order of creation knowable through human reason reveals that God created all human beings equally free and, therefore, that legitimate political authority arises through the consent of the governed.

The principle of consent also means that wisdom is an insufficient claim to rule legitimately. One may hope and pray that, once political authority is established, those who govern are wise. One may even design a constitution that attempts to distinguish wisdom and arrange a consensual path for the wise to rise to power. But the assertion of wisdom alone does not confer political authority. The claim "all men are created equal" means that every individual by nature, and thus by right, possesses equal title to govern himself.

While the recognition of human equality and the corresponding principle that legitimate government is instituted through consent are in some sense modern political ideas, the founders derived them from classical metaphysical premises. Both Wilson's and Hamilton's reasoning presumes that human beings ought to be treated in accordance with the kind of being they are, which is perceptible in our unique attributes and capacities. They adopt Thomas Aquinas's ontology that being and goodness are convertible terms—that human excellence is found by uncovering what we truly are. The founders, in other words, derived an "ought"—human beings have a right to liberty—from an "is"—human nature has the capacity to exercise freedom. What most distinguishes the founders from classical thinkers is not a different approach to nature or natural law but rather the founders' appreciation and embrace of equal human freedom as a central aspect of human nature.[20]

The Purpose of Political Authority

As the right of natural liberty follows from our equal capacities to direct our own lives, the principle of consent follows from human equality. Consent alone, however, while necessary, is insufficient. Legitimate political authority also must be directed toward the ends proper to the political community.

The primary end of good government, according to the Declaration of Independence, is to secure the rights with which individuals have been

"endowed by their Creator." Good government may do more than secure natural rights, but no government can be considered good if it fails to secure the natural rights of the people it governs. The conviction that governments are instituted, first and foremost, to secure natural rights was the second revolution of 1776.

Natural rights are natural in the sense that they inhere in human nature. The natural rights to acquire and possess property, for example, are derivative of every individual's ownership of his or her own labor. Consider slavery: A slave is someone whose labor is owned by another; the slave labors, but the master owns the fruits. If all men are created equal, then human slavery violates natural justice, because the owner steals the slave's labor from the slave. Ownership of one's own labor, in fact, is one of the fundamental ways in which all men are created equal.

Government is needed because our natural rights are not secure without it. In a state of nature—that is, the condition in which no commonly recognized governing authority exists—a natural moral law exists, as discussed above. It is wrong, for example, to take others' property and steal others' labor. But human beings do not always recognize or obey the natural precepts of right and wrong. "What is government itself," James Madison asks in *Federalist* 51, "but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary."[21] Angels, presumably, would know and do what is right. But men are not angels; they do not always know what they should do, and they do not always do what they ought. It is worth noting that, despite deploring slavery in principle and powerfully articulating the natural law that underpinned human liberty and equality, Madison, Jefferson, and Wilson were all slaveowners[22]

While each individual and family may justly attempt to protect what rightfully belongs to them in the state of nature, such self-protection inevitably proves insufficient. Moreover, many other goods—art, education, and science—become possible only when human beings live in a community of sufficient size, scope, and learning to overcome necessity and make advances in the liberal arts. The requirements of both mere life and

the good life lead men into political communities. While political communities must be constructed and require consent to be instituted legitimately, the founders held that men are social and political beings whose nature leads them into political communities.[23]

In his 1792 essay "Property," Madison offers his clearest statement on the purposes of political authority: "Government is instituted to protect property of every sort." By property, Madison does not mean just land or material possessions. "In its larger and juster meaning," the concept of property "embraces every thing to which a man may attach a value and have a right; and *which leaves to every one else the like advantage*." (Emphasis in original.) An individual thus can have property in land, merchandise, or money but also "in his opinions and the free communication of them" and "in the free use of his faculties and free choice of the objects on which to employ them." An individual, Madison says, "has a property of peculiar value in his religious opinions, and in the profession and practice dictated by them." "A *just* government," Madison teaches, is one "which *impartially* secures to every man, whatever is his *own*.[24] (Emphasis in original.) One's natural rights are the property most fundamentally one's own.

Hamilton, quoting Blackstone, says the same thing:

> The principal aim of society is to protect individuals, in the enjoyment of those absolute rights, which were vested in them by the immutable laws of nature. . . . The first and primary end of human laws, is to maintain and regulate these absolute rights of individuals.[25]

By regulate, Hamilton means "to make regular." The primary end of government is to make regular the enjoyment of our natural rights—to make each person's property secure in Madison's "larger and juster meaning."

The founders' conception of just government is thus different from that which took hold in America in the early 20th century. Unlike influential progressive thinkers such as Herbert Croly and political leaders such

as Franklin D. Roosevelt, the founders did not hold that a fundamental purpose of government is to provide directly for the people's material needs or to ameliorate all unfortunate conditions. They instead understood the role of government as securing the conditions, including the economic conditions, that would allow Americans to be responsible for themselves—to employ their natural rights to provide for themselves, their families, and those under their care. Responsibility for oneself, for one's loved ones, and for one's community is the American founding's quintessential virtue. Responsibility allows individuals who have been endowed with equal natural liberty to use their freedom well.

Respect for and recognition of individuals' responsibility for their own well-being—including their moral responsibility to their neighbors and, as I shall discuss, their religious duties to the Creator—led the founders to conclude that a legitimate political community is not and *cannot* be tasked with securing every element of the good life. Indeed, the founders held that we do not turn over our most fundamental responsibilities to the political community. Some rights are by their very nature "inalienable," meaning that authority over them is not granted to government.[26]

As already noted, the establishment of limited ends or purposes of political authority was the second revolution of 1776. Today we take for granted that government is not tasked with saving citizens' souls, but this truly was a revolution in the understanding of the purposes of government. It corresponds to—and was developed from—the precept that God does not directly grant political authority to any one person or group of people. The Creator, by design, leaves us free to organize ourselves politically using the precepts of the natural moral law as guidance, including the natural rights of mankind.

The Creator endows human beings with reason and freedom, which entail both the ability to discern right from wrong and the capacity to organize their political life according to rationally knowable principles of justice. The Creator, however, does not ordain political governors, a legal code for political governance, or a divine constitution of government. In this sense, we truly are free: not free from the moral law or the demands

of justice, but rather free to apprehend and deliberately choose to live justly in political communities that we ourselves devise.

The Recognition of Legitimate Religious Authority

Political freedom and proper limitations on the state's authority do not imply indifference to religion. Politics must remain limited, in part, because of the nature of religious truth and in recognition of religious authority's proper domain. Here the founders stand in stark contrast to those today who say our politics and laws must be neutral toward religion and comprehensive conceptions of the good. Such neutrality is often said to be a central tenet of liberalism and a prerequisite of any form of sensible church-state politics in our time of deep pluralism. The founders' natural rights republicanism instead starts with the "fundamental and undeniable truth" set forth in the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights: "that religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence."

The founders grasped this truth through biblical revelation and philosophical reasoning. Their philosophical argument holds that an omniscient and all-powerful deity who created mankind with the capacities of reason and free will would find acceptable only worship that exercised those capacities.[27] Madison articulates this natural theology in his 1813 presidential proclamation calling for a national day of voluntary "public humiliation and prayer" to secure God's blessing during the War of 1812:

> If the public homage of a people can ever be worthy [of] the favorable regard of the Holy and Omniscient Being to whom it is addressed, it must be that, in which those who join in it are guided only by their free choice, by the impulse of their hearts and the dictates of their consciences.[28]

While Madison and the founders did not quite put it this way, we might say that an omniscient God who created us with the capacity to adore Him, or even to love Him, would likely settle for nothing less than our full devotion. That full devotion, adoration, and love can only be given freely, and, thus, freedom is a necessary prerequisite of religious worship.

That true religious worship must be offered freely and cannot be coerced is the fundamental philosophical and theological insight that animated the American founding's position on religious liberty and matters of church and state. That worship must be one's own to be true means that the control and direction of one's religious beliefs and exercises, in a fundamental sense, must remain one's own. A state dedicated to securing religious liberty for its citizens, accordingly, is not indifferent or neutral toward religion, but rather one that restrains itself to its proper jurisdiction.

The state's absence of authority in matters of religion also enables parents and churches to exercise their respective authorities. Take the parental duty to care for every aspect of one's child's well-being, including nurturing his or her spiritual and religious development: It would be an abdication of parental authority and responsibility to turn that duty over to the state—to grant the state discretion to determine the religious upbringing of one's own child. Retaining authority over one's own religious beliefs and the religious formation of one's children lies at the core of the founders' assertion that the ability to worship according to conscience is an "unalienable right."

From the polity's perspective, church authority can be conceived similarly. The founders' natural rights philosophy means that church authorities cannot depend on the state's coercive power for their own integrity. Churches must be voluntary associations; they cannot use the state's authority to compel membership or enforce doctrine. At the same time, churches themselves remain free from state coercion in matters outside of the state's legitimate authority. The state lacks authority to appoint the church's hierarchy or leadership (or veto such appointments), impose religious doctrines on churches, or prescribe or proscribe forms of worship.

Heresy still exists, of course, but it is to be defined by church authorities and cannot be punished through the state's legal and coercive mechanisms. Limitations on the state's authority honor the rightful authority of churches to govern themselves internally and shepherd their flocks, free from state interference, in matters of religious doctrine and worship.

By restraining itself and recognizing the limits of legitimate governmental authority, the state implicitly recognizes religion's distinct and superior authority. The absence of laws mandating specific religious beliefs or exercises, dictating the religious education of the young, and regulating churches in their religious capacities does not constitute a commitment to secularism, at least not if secularism is understood to be atheism or to presume that religion is opposed to reason. The founders' constitutionalism is instead grounded in a commitment to religious liberty, which itself is grounded on the religious truth accessible to human reason that religious worship must be freely given.

Religious liberty and the separation of church and state also recognize that political authorities as such possess no special insight or access to divine revelation. As Madison emphasized in "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," a 1785 petition against a proposed Virginia bill to create state-sponsored churches, we have no good reason to believe—and many reasons to doubt—that political authorities are competent to judge religious truth.[29] Those truths that lie beyond reason—matters above the natural law that pertain exclusively to the divine law—are the proper subject of church authority alone. The limits of human wisdom contain political authority to temporal matters accessible to our principled and prudential judgments.

Proscribing state authority over religion, however, does not mean minimizing the political importance or influence of religion. As Madison and the founders understood, religion and religious authority do not need Caesar's sword to guide society. "We are teaching the world the great truth," Madison wrote in 1822, "that Govts. do better without Kings & Nobles than with them. The merit will be doubled by the other lesson that Religion flourishes in greater purity, without than with the aid of Govt."[30]

Later, Alexis de Tocqueville would more systematically develop this insight in *Democracy in America*. "The short space of sixty years," Tocqueville suggests, "will never confine the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never suffice for his heart." Given human mortality, "disbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity." Tocqueville perceived that religion could govern men and women by elevating their hopes, forming their beliefs, and shaping their moral lives as long as it grounded its force in the enduring "sentiments, instincts, and passions" of all men and women and not "the interests of this world" or its "ephemeral powers." He counsels that "in uniting with different political powers, religion can therefore contract only an onerous alliance. It does not need their assistance to live, and in serving them it can die."[31] Religious liberty and the separation of church and state, ironically, make it possible for religion to be the first of America's political institutions.

A Revolutionary Truth

The implications of the idea that true worship must be according to conviction and conscience were revolutionary for politics. When forming a political community and establishing sovereign political power, individuals retain authority over their religious exercises. The state's authority does not extend to securing its citizens' salvation, directing children's spiritual education, or supervising churches in their religious functions. It is unintelligible to grant the state such authority since the coercive force of law cannot bring about true religious belief. Political authority must remain limited given the nature of true religious devotion; because individuals, with their churches, are responsible for their own souls and the souls of their children; and out of deference to and respect for church authority, which is distinct from and independent of political authority.

While the founders did not explicitly ground their political philosophy in the Bible, the American commitment to religious freedom and the separation of church and state are consistent with Jesus's teaching to "render . . . unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."[32] Both American constitutionalism and the Gospel acknowledge the separate and legitimate authorities of state and church.

Because political authority does not possess the mandate of divine authority, it must be founded on principles accessible to human reason—above all, the truth that all human beings are created equal and, therefore, that legitimate government is instituted through consent. These basic principles of political right—what I have called the revolutions of 1776—task politics with the protection of our natural and inalienable rights and recognize the authority of churches to do the divinely ordained work they are called to do.

This is the legacy for which the signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. We honor their legacy and accept our rightful patrimony by understanding these revolutionary principles—principles that still make America, in Lincoln's words, "the last best hope of earth."[33]

Notes

1. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018).

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 69.

3. Thomas Jefferson to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.18600200/.

4. Jefferson to Weightman.

5. This discussion of equality adopts the presentation I set forth in Vincent Phillip Muñoz, *Religious Liberty and the American Founding: Natural Rights and the Original Meanings of the First Amendment Religion Clauses* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 43–45. My interpretation in both this chapter and my book follows that of Harry V. Jaffa. See, for example, Harry V. Jaffa, "Thomas Aquinas Meets Thomas Jefferson," *Interpretation* 33, no. 2 (2006): 179.

6. The natural equality of all human beings is why, in his original draft of the

Declaration, Jefferson included in his indictment against the king that "he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither."

7. Jefferson to Weightman.

8. Mark David Hall, "James Wilson: Presbyterian, Anglican, Thomist, or Deist? Does It Matter?," in *The Founders on God and Government*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach et al. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 187–88, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1079&context=hist_fac.

9. Mark David Hall, "Notes and Documents: James Wilson's Law Lectures," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128, no. 1 (2004): 63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20093679.

10. James Wilson, "Of Man, as a Member of Society," in *Collected Works of James Wilson*, eds. Kermit L. Hall and Mark David Hall (Liberty Fund, 2007), 1:636–37.

11. Wilson, "Of Man, as a Member of Society," 1:638.

12. Wilson, "Of the Law of Nature," in *Collected Works of James Wilson*, eds. Hall and Hall, 1:501.

13. Wilson, "Of Man, as a Member of Society."

14. Wilson, "Of Man, as a Member of Society," 1:639.

15. For a more in-depth discussion of this point, see Muñoz, *Religious Liberty and the American Founding*, 59–66.

16. I speak here not of the natural authority of parents over children but of adult individuals vis-à-vis one another. What constitutes consent and this possibility of tacit consent are vexing questions that I bypass here.

17. Alexander Hamilton, "The Farmer Refuted," in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett (Columbia University Press, 1961–79), https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch3s5.html.

18. Hamilton, "The Farmer Refuted." The same rationale is employed in Papers of James Madison, "James Madison: Essay on Sovereignty, December 1835," Founders Online, December 1835, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/99-02-02-3188.

19. Romans 13:1–8; and Acts 5:27–29.

20. In this light, one might consider the following statement in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 413.

> The most profound and vast geniuses of Rome and Greece were never able to arrive at the idea, so general but at the same time so simple, of the similarity of men and of the equal right to freedom that each one of them bears from birth; and they did their utmost to prove that slavery was natural and that it would always exist. Even more, everything indicates that even those of the ancients who were slaves before becoming free, several

> of whom have left us beautiful writings, themselves viewed servitude in the same light.
>
> All of the great writers of antiquity were part of the aristocracy of masters, or at least they saw that aristocracy established without dispute before their eyes; their minds, after expanding in several directions, were therefore found limited in this one, and it was necessary that Jesus Christ come to earth to make it understood that all members of the human species are naturally alike and equal.

21. *Federalist*, no. 51 (James Madison).

22. Wilson freed the single slave he owned in 1793. See Mark David Hall, *The Political and Legal Philosophy of James Wilson, 1742–1798* (University of Missouri Press, 1997), 30.

23. On this point, consider Wilson, "Of Man, as a Member of Society."

24. Papers of James Madison, "For the National Gazette, 27 March 1792," Founders Online, March 27, 1792, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-14-02-0238.

25. Hamilton, "The Farmer Refuted."

26. In this light consider the following passage from Founders' Constitution, "The Essex Result," University of Chicago Press, April 29, 1778, https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch4s8.html: "All men are born equally free. The rights they possess at their births are equal, and of the same kind. Some of those rights are alienable, and may be parted with for an equivalent. Others are unalienable and inherent, and of that importance, that no equivalent can be received in exchange. Sometimes we shall mention the surrendering of a power to controul our natural rights, which perhaps is speaking with more precision, than when we use the expression of parting with natural rights—but the same thing is intended." The right to revolution is perhaps the clearest example of an inalienable natural right. The people's right to revolution could never be secured by the government or through the government; the very idea is nonsensical. By its nature, the right to revolution is a non-alienated right.

27. See Muñoz, *Religious Liberty and the American Founding*, 74–82.

28. James Madison, "Presidential Proclamation, July 23, 1813," in *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, ed. J. C. A. Stagg et al. (University of Virginia Press, 2008), 6:458–59.

29. See Article 5 in Papers of James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, [ca. 20 June] 1785," Founders Online, June 20, 1785, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163.

30. James Madison to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822, Founders' Constitution, https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions66.html.

31. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 283–85.

32. Matthew 22:21.

33. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Annual Message," speech, Washington, DC, December 1, 1862, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/202180.

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