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Divine Sanction and the American Case for Revolution

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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.

5. Samuel Davies, *Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of a Good Soldier. A Sermon Preached to Captain Overton's Independent Company of Volunteers, Raised in Hanover County, Virginia, August 17, 1755* (pub. by author, 1756), 17–18.

6. Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 92.

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.

12. Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (Hill & Wang, 2005), 21–25.

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

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