

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

REVOLUTIONARY BETRAYAL:
THE FALL OF KING GEORGE III IN THE EXPERIENCE
OF POLITICIANS, PLANTERS, AND PREACHERS

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Introduction

When describing the imperial crisis of 1763-1776 between the British government and the American colonists, historians often refer to Great Britain as a united entity unto itself, a single character in the imperial conflict. While this offers rhetorical benefits, it oversimplifies the complex constitutional relationship between the American periphery and the British center. Instead, the path to independence is a story of how Americans rejected the authority of each part of the central British government in turn. Americans drew a clear distinction between protesting the authority of the British Parliament and that of King George III himself.

Rather than recalling the nature of their protest against the British ministry or Parliament, a deeper understanding of why Americans rejected the authority of the British monarchy may explain why a disagreement concerning the imperial constitution became a struggle for American independence. Americans, especially educated elites, understood the complexity of the British government and allowed it to shape the language of their protest. First, they objected to the arbitrary authority of Parliament and later the oppressive actions of the British ministry. Nevertheless, they maintained their respect and affection for George III until his failure to restrain his government's oppressive policies caused them to reject his authority as well. Having then severed all constitutional connections with Great Britain, independence came as a natural consequence. Therefore, understanding why Americans rejected the authority of the British monarch may help to explain the purpose of America's founding.

Throughout the twentieth century, historians have offered several interpretations of the causes of the imperial crisis that led to independence. Most historians have argued that the Revolution arose out of either economic or political causes. The Progressive School, which dominated the historical discipline in America from the 1910s to the 1930s, tended to emphasize

the economic aspects of the conflict with Great Britain. Many Progressive historians developed their skills in a time when the dominant political movement protested class inequalities in the American economic system as well as corruption in the government. In their interpretation, then, the American Revolution was primarily a social movement, which arose out of class struggles inherent in the British system.

Charles Beard was one of the most influential historians of this time. Under his interpretation, economic forces were central to the American Revolution. The elites of society, he argued, acted out of self-interest rather than republican virtue. His *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* argued that the Constitution represented the triumph of elites who had made it their goal to guide the Revolution to their own advantage.¹

Carl Lotus Becker also influenced Progressive historiography. He argued that there were “two general movements” at work in the American Revolution.² The first was a political and military conflict between the colonies and Great Britain. The second, larger movement included the “democratization of American politics and society.”³ In both movements, Becker’s focus remained on economic causation. The political actions of Parliament, he argued, affected each social class differently and caused conflict not only with Parliament but also within the colonies.⁴

The Neo-Consensus School revised their predecessor’s arguments in the late 1940s and 1950s. Finding their nation a new world power, pitted against the expanding Soviet Union, American historians sought to distance their nation’s origins from the radical Bolshevik Revolution, which birthed their communist enemies. In line with this goal, their research focused

¹ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998), xxxi, 18. See also a description of Beard’s work in Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 131-132.

² Carl Lotus Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 56-58. For another example from the Progressive School, see J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

on the political features of American independence and the experience of the elites rather than economic struggles between social classes. Edmund S. Morgan articulated the claims of many Neo-Consensus historians by arguing that the American Revolution represents the “history of the American’s search” for political principles that guided the new nation.⁵ The influence of Neo-Consensus historians remains prominent. Jack P. Greene’s most recent work argued that the American Revolution was “the unintended consequence of a dispute about law.”⁶ For Greene, the primary causes of American independence did not rest in a social uprising or a fundamental disagreement concerning human rights. Instead, it was a constitutional struggle, the consequence of a dispute about which part of the English government should hold power in the colonies.

Arising in the 1960s, the Neo-Whig School also focused on political and ideological causes of American independence, but they modified the Neo-Consensus view by giving greater agency to non-elite groups and emphasizing the radical nature of patriot politics. With an focus on understanding the past in terms of its own culture, they consider the Revolution based on eighteenth-century perceptions. Bernard Bailyn launched this school of thought in his monumental work, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. He argued that the “ultimate origins” of political philosophy in America came from the “radical social and political thought of the English Civil War and of the Commonwealth period.”⁷ The “radicalism the Americans conveyed to the world,” he insisted, transformed the relationship of the colonies to

⁵ Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic*, 3.

⁶ Jack P. Greene, *The Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1. See also Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Politics of the British Empire and the United States, 1607-1788* (Athens, GA: University of George Press, 1986) for a similar interpretation of the causes of the imperial crisis.

⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 34. Bailyn came to this conclusion by tracing the thought of philosophers, political theorists, and lay writers who influenced the political writers of the pre-independence era (1760-1776), sifting through over four hundred political pamphlets (ix). At the time, scholars had not yet analyzed this body of writing, but they proved to be a treasure trove of knowledge. Bailyn came to realize from this study that the American Revolution, for its time, was a truly radical event, guided by writers who were on the fringe of English political thought (v, 34).

their mother country.⁸

Pauline Maier offered a major contribution to the Neo-Whig School. Her work continued the theme of a focus on politics, but she expanded Bailyn's interpretation beyond the educated elite of America. She insisted that "no leader, not even the most outspoken American partisan, was anti-British" at the beginning of the imperial crisis, but a "confluence of events" throughout the empire convinced Americans that "a plot was afoot against freedom."⁹

Maier's work warrants special focus here, because it is especially relevant to the relationship of American colonists with the British monarchy. While the majority of her work gave agency to Great Britain as a uniform political unit, in later chapters Maier made a compelling distinction between American protest of Parliament and of the king. She rightly identified that at first Americans did not implicate the king in the perceived conspiracy against American freedom. They instead blamed the British ministry and Parliament and insisted that individuals from these bodies were deceiving the king, blinding him from the sufferings of his loyal American subjects. The king finally became "implicated in his ministers' policies when a petition movement of late 1769 and 1770 failed to "win the King's support."¹⁰

Maier's now forty-year-old assertions remain relevant. The notion that colonists believed

⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁹ Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: Knopf, 1972), xii, xvii.

Gordon Wood also expanded the focus of the Neo-Whig School to not only the radical politics of the American Revolution, but the effect it had on American culture. He expanded the boundaries of the American Revolution into the nineteenth century and argued that the ideal of equality, which arose out of radical ideology of the Revolution led to sweeping change in American culture. For Wood, the true radicalism of the Revolution came in the decades after the war for independence when the idea of equality of opportunity became manifest in every American institution. Wood's arguments are similar to that of Becker but take a cultural rather than an economic focus. Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1991), 5, 232.

For an example of more recent scholarship which continues in the tradition of the Neo-Whig School see Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 203, 208. See chapter 6, "The International Sons of Liberty and the Ministerial Plot, 1768-1770" and chapter 7, "The Implication of the King, 1770-1772" for Maier's arguments concerning this point.

the actions of Parliament and the British ministry amounted to a conscious effort to subject Americans to slavery is well established among historians.¹¹ Nevertheless, Maier's research has some limitations. Her focus is on the voice of the common people – in her case, the actions of the Sons of Liberty – at the expense of more elite Americans' point of view, and she does not explain the subtle motivations of different groups and individuals in British America.

These three major schools of thought contributed to a deeper understanding of the causes of American independence by exploring the economic and political motivations of both elite and common Americans. Nevertheless, there may have been a third component that none of these schools have explored fully. While political and economic injustice no doubt motivated Americans' actions, the power of emotion in the imperial crisis may have driven Americans to action more than any other influence. This was especially true concerning the relationship between different groups of Americans and the British monarch. Indeed, Americans related to their king in a much more emotional way than they did with any other part of the British government.

In *The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776*, Brendan McConville began to explore the role of emotions in American independence.¹² His work began

¹¹ Maier wrote in her introduction to the 1991 reprinting of this work that “the argument in *From Resistance to Revolution* that a confluence of events in England, Ireland, America, and elsewhere convinced colonists that a plot was afoot against freedom remains, I think, unchallenged.” Historians continue to reference the fear in America that British ministers and Parliament were actively scheming to make Americans their slaves. *Ibid.*, xii. In fact, this notion is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the Neo-Whig School. Gordon Wood cited Bailyn as the first to suggest the fear of a conspiracy as a major cause of the American Revolution, and it is prevalent in other studies who ascribe to many of Bailyn's arguments. In fact, as Wood suggested, Bailyn's argument has become so powerful that historians no longer seem to question it. Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1982): 403. See Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins*, 94-95, 124-131, 145-148. See also Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, chapter 6, “The International Sons of Liberty and the Ministerial Plot, 1768-1770,” 161-197, especially 170-177, and Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 261-266.

¹² Within the past five years, other historians have examined the prominence of emotion in the American Revolution as well. Nicole Eustace argued that emotion played a major part not only in the Revolution itself, but in “the reordering of Anglo-American life.” Nicole Eustace, “*Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming*

by challenging the established understanding of the nature of the political culture of eighteenth-century America. Historians, he contended, have always imagined Americans before 1776 as potential republicans constantly engaged in becoming what they are today.¹³ Instead, McConville argued that the political culture of colonial America between the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and American independence in 1776 “was decidedly monarchical and imperial.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it remained so “almost to the moment of American independence” when in the space of one or two years the legitimacy of royal authority abruptly collapsed in an outpouring of emotion due to a misunderstanding concerning the king’s role in the empire’s political structure.¹⁵

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, McConville argued for the devotion of most Americans to Hanoverian kings in the eighteenth century by examining two parts of colonial life: religion and material culture. A deep connection to their English past led Americans to view their king as their Protestant protector, the bulwark against religious instability and Catholic influence.¹⁶ British Americans expressed their love for the king in royal celebrations and political holidays. Furthermore, the king’s image saturated colonial society. The symbols and images of Hanoverian rulers appeared on mugs, coins, portraits in homes, and many other commodities. Monarchy, McConville argued, was a powerfully emotional part of everyday life in British America.

of the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 15. Likewise, Sarah Knott argued that sensibility, what she calls a “distinctive *mode of self*,” was a major part of the American Revolution. As colonial Americans transformed society, she argued, they were also transforming themselves. Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5. An emphasis on emotion and sensibility in such studies and in McConville’s work may mark a rising trend in the historiography of the American Revolutionary period.

¹³ McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*, 2-6. McConville contends that colonial Americans cultivated a deep emotional tie to the British monarch, seeing him as their Protestant protector and benevolent father. When, he wrote, “the weight of events . . . implicated George III, the political and emotional apparatus that maintained the empire began to collapse in a rolling cascade that ended in sacrilege and iconoclasm.” *Ibid.*, 249-250. See also pages 106-113, 171-172, 245, and especially 250-266.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 7, 249.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50, 82, 86, 112.

Yet the cult of monarchy in America did not last. According to McConville, royal authority collapsed not as an inevitable circumstance of a gradual decline in affection for the king, but in a sudden, iconoclast outbreak of contempt. Americans' rejection of George III was so violent because the powerful emotions that had once bound Americans to their monarch turned so suddenly against him.¹⁷ Throughout the imperial crisis, he insisted, even the most extreme activists did not wish to affect a separation from Britain but to "preserve what was" not in an "American republic but a monarchical America firmly situated in a new constitution."¹⁸ Royal authority collapsed, though, because George III failed to restrain the abuse of Parliament and his ministry. Thus, in the minds of Americans he became implicated in a plot to subject British America to slavery.

McConville's arguments are compelling, but he tended to treat various regions and groups of people monolithically, failing to account for the changing motivations of individuals in a variety of circumstances. While a bottom-up approach served him well, the voice of more educated, elite groups of Americans played only a small role. He convincingly showed that America was indeed monarchical throughout most of the eighteenth century, but within his model, historians must explain exactly why various groups and individuals rejected the king they had so fervently loved and followed for so many years.

Focusing on the experience of three elite groups in colonial America will help to fulfill these arguments and uncover new and more nuanced motivations among Americans in very different regions and circumstances.¹⁹ First, the delegates of the Continental Congress were an

¹⁷ "At the end of empire, Americans engaged in an orgy of iconoclastic violence in the streets . . . swelling love for the monarch become mistrust and then uncontrollable hatred expressed in the destruction of royal arms, portraits, emblems, and most visibly, royal statues and effigies. *Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁹ Examining elites is enlightening for several reasons. Educated individuals tended to keep records of their commonplace experience. This is valuable because it allows historians to make connections between Americans' individualized experience and their political decisions. Elite Americans left behind an abundance of diaries and

elite group of politicians who represented the whole of America. Their decisions and powerful influence affected not only elites, but common Americans as well. Their writings, from their first meeting in 1774 to their leadership in declaring collective independence from Great Britain in 1776, offers the most articulate explanation for Americans' motivation in rejecting not only parliamentary authority but eventually royal authority as well. Most delegates insisted on maintaining their loyalty to King George III as they protested parliamentary authority, and this is evident in the language of their many petitions and resolutions. In the year that passed between the summer of 1775 through July 1776, though, more and more delegates began to change the tone of their protest. The delegates of the Continental Congress finally rejected royal authority because the speeches and proclamation of King George III convinced them that reconciliation was impossible without the total subjection of American liberty.

Second, Southern planters were in a unique position because they experienced the relational structure of hierarchy as an everyday part of their lives. Planters saw themselves as kings over their little kingdoms, and large plantations were in many ways a microcosm of the English empire's monarchical structure. Planters implemented a bureaucratic structure to manage their many slaves and collect regular reports on the progress of their agricultural and industrial pursuits. Because planters often saw themselves as small kings, their relationship with slaves informed their own relationship with the British monarch.

Planters understood that they were in a reciprocal – though inherently unequal – relationship with their slaves in which they had a responsibility to care for slaves' material needs and protect them from the arbitrary power of their appointed overseers. Ideally, slaves enjoyed an open channel of communication with their master in which they could complain of

letters that offer information on their motivations for these political decisions. Also, elites often held a position of influence over common Americans. Examining their motivations might help to explain the actions of many other Americans.

mistreatment from the overseers who drove them. They expected the master to investigate their complaints and correct the situation when necessary, and masters took great pride in providing this service to their slaves. The writings of many planters suggest that as subjects of the British monarch, they expected the same service from their king that they provided for their own subordinates. Therefore, when King George III failed to address Americans' many legitimate complaints of ministerial corruption, they rejected his authority because he failed to fulfill the responsibilities of a benevolent ruler.

Third, the political rhetoric of American ministers helps explain the experience of educated religious Americans. Ministers also had a unique place in colonial America, because they were perhaps the most influential of any of these three groups. They held influence over their congregations and often published their sermons, which many Americans read voraciously, who might not otherwise have picked up a political pamphlet. McConville wrote extensively on how Americans viewed their king as a Protestant protector. Because Americans were so “virulently anti-Catholic,”²⁰ he wrote, the “emotional [tie] between the individual and ruler” was dependent on the ultimate “defeat of Catholicism in England” after decades of religious and political upheaval.²¹ The post-Stuart monarchs were the symbols and protectors of this victory. Colonial ministers, therefore, expected their ruler to fulfill the responsibility of that role by supporting the influence of Protestantism throughout the world and protecting the English church from Popish influence. The king's failure to address American grievances concerning the Quebec Act and his refusal to restrain a ministry that Americans believed had fallen under papal influence led to their rejection of royal authority. Many ministers believed the king had failed as their Protestant protector.

²⁰ McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

An important theme that arises in each case is the influence of individuals' commonplace experience on their political decisions. Americans acted based on the emotions that they derived from their daily experience. This was certainly true of the politicians that made up the First and Second Continental Congress. Emotion often guided their decisions and their communication with the British government as they reacted to George III's speeches and proclamations. Southern planters interpreted their relationship with the king based on their role as fatherly protectors of their slaves. American ministers reacted violently when they perceived that their monarch had failed to secure their religious liberty. Using Scripture to interpret the king's actions, they aligned the once vigilant Protestant sentinel with some of ancient Israel's most degenerate kings. In each case, the interpretive framework of their unique experience defined their perception of the king and formed their reaction to the extraordinary politics of the American founding era.

Because their individualized experience was different, politicians, planters, and ministers all had differing perceptions of the king's role and the responsibilities that he needed to fulfill. King George III relinquished his authority by failing to meet the requirements of these varying roles. For the radical delegates of the Continental Congress, the king was a legitimate ruler turned arbitrary tyrant. For Southern planters who embraced independence, he was an attentive plantation father turned negligent slave driver. For many American patriot ministers, he was their Protestant guardian turned Popish conciliator. Different groups had varying expectations of their monarch, but when he failed to fulfill his responsibilities, the consequences were quite similar. Ultimately, royal authority collapsed, because Americans became disillusioned with King George III.

Chapter 1:

“Great Britain May Thank Herself:” King George III, Congressional Delegates, and American Independence, 1774-1776

In October 1774, the members of First Continental Congress issued a petition to King George III recounting the grievances they had suffered under the illegitimate authority of Parliament. Throughout the appeal, they constantly assured the king of their loyalty, insisting that their hearts remained full of the “sentiments of duty to your majesty and affection to the parent state.”¹ They could not foresee, however, how quickly their affection and loyalty would fade. Less than two years later, the Second Continental Congress would aggressively indict the monarch for some of the same grievances in their Declaration of Independence.² The writings of the delegates of the First and Second Continental Congress indicate a shift in focus marked by the protest of parliamentary authority that, in time, evolved into a full rejection of royal allegiance. This pronounced shift demands the attention of all historians of the American Revolutionary period, because it helps to explain the reasoning of American politicians in their decision to abolish all political ties to their mother country. In their minds, the only political connection between Great Britain and the American colonies lay in submission to royal authority. When the delegates began to protest not only parliamentary power but royal prerogative as well, they severed the last remaining political connection to Britain and declared independence not as a future objective but as a present circumstance.

Examining the nature of this shift will further explain the complexities of the events leading to Congress’s decision for independence. Specifically, answering the questions of when

¹ Continental Congress, “The Petition of the Grand American Continental Congress” (Boston, 1774), 7.

² “The History of the present King of Great-Britain is a History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations, all having in direct Object the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.” Continental Congress, The Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776 (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1776).

and, more importantly, why this shift in focus occurred among the delegates of Congress may help reveal the background of the decision for independence. The pamphlets, letters, notes, and diaries of the delegates from August 1774 to July 1776 provide a guide to the experience of the American political elite in the imperial conflict.³ They trace the constitutional struggles that members of Congress expressed concerning their connection to the king and Parliament. These documents recount the delegates' changing opinion of the crown, which led to independence in July 1776. The delegates reacted to a series of speeches and proclamations from July 1775 to March 1776,⁴ in which the king made known his punitive intentions for the American colonies. These proclamations, along with other correspondence from England, convinced the majority of delegates that George III would not accept reconciliation with Great Britain except under terms of complete submission to the authority of king and Parliament. These events nurtured increasingly passionate contempt for the crown among more and more members of Congress.⁵

As the delegates of the First Continental Congress prepared to meet in September 1774, they began to reiterate the arguments against parliamentary authority that had remained on American lips and pens for nearly eleven years. The passage of the Coercive Acts earlier in 1774 had released a flurry of pamphlets and speeches aiming to renew the struggle. Two such

³ Focusing on this small body of individuals also helps to confine the parameters of the research.

⁴ Note that because of the slow nature of communication across the Atlantic Ocean any event that occurred in England would not be known in America for about two months. For the delegates of the First and Second Continental Congress, then, the king issued these speeches and proclamations from September 1775 to early June 1776.

⁵ Pauline Maier argued that the American people rejected royal authority when violence broke out in Massachusetts in April 1775. The sending of troops to subdue Americans was the last straw for most colonists. Her analysis applies to the common American rather than the intellectual elite. When one examines the writings of the delegates of the Continental Congress, though, the story seems different. They maintained their allegiance and affection for the king even after the beginning of the war in April 1775. The monarch's words rather than his military advances caused this shift in the minds of the members of Congress. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*.

Brendan McConville argued that the collapse of royal authority was due to a misunderstanding concerning the king's role in the British Empire's political structure. His narrative of the rise and fall of the post-Stuart monarchs' authority in colonial America spans the whole of the long eighteenth century and relies on a more general analysis of the changing trends of royal popularity among common Americans. When one examines in detail a narrow scope, though, the span of less than two years in the story, particular events and individual action become much more significant. McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 7, 249.

pamphlets, written by newly appointed delegates on the eve of the First Continental Congress, summarized the view of most delegates.

Thomas Jefferson's "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" passionately outlined Parliament's encroachments on American liberties. He listed the many crimes of Parliament against America including the cruel acts to punish Boston, but he reminded his readers that "[t]he true ground on which we declare these acts void is," not the acts' cruelty, but that Parliament had no authority to bind Americans in any case.⁶ He argued that Parliament had no legitimacy in America, because the colonists had no representation there. He continued:

Not only the principles of common sense, but the feelings of human nature, must be surrendered up before his majesty's subjects here can be persuaded to believe that they hold their political existence at the will of a British parliament. Shall these governments be dissolved, their property annihilated and their people reduced to a state of nature, at the imperious breath of a body of men, whom they never saw, in whom they never confided, and over whom they have no powers of punishment or removal . . . ?⁷

Not only did these words articulate the constitutional struggle at work, but they also reveal that the dispute evoked the deepest emotions of even the most enlightened men of the time, emotions that became a motivating factor for the members of Congress.

In quite a different pamphlet published in the same month, James Wilson offered a more detailed explanation for the rejection of parliamentary authority over internal affairs in the colonies.⁸ Referring to more than the inherent injustice of the situation, Wilson made the case for the legal and constitutional illegitimacy of recent acts of Parliament. The grievances that he listed found their origins in "the principles . . . of the British constitution."⁹ He reminded his

⁶ Thomas Jefferson, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" (Williamsburg: Rind, 1774), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ James Wilson served as a Pennsylvania delegate in both the First and Second Continental Congress. He was among the handful of American statesmen who signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

⁹ James Wilson, "Considerations on the Nature and Extent of Legislative Authority of the British Parliament" (Philadelphia, 1774), 2.

readers of the precedents that applied in this dispute.¹⁰ One of the most important principles of the English constitution was that no man should pay taxes without his consent. Because taxes were necessary to maintain the nation, the House of Commons came into being as a way for the people to give consent to taxation and other policies.¹¹

Wilson examined every avenue in the constitution that would justify parliamentary authority in America. He concluded that there could be no reason in line with the British constitution that the laws of Parliament should bind Americans other than that they were represented in that body and therefore able to give their consent.¹² He cited a precedent to strengthen his argument. After the conquest of Ireland, British judges decided that the statutes of British legislative bodies could not bind the Irish people “because they do not send Knights [representatives] to Parliament.”¹³ Instead, they were subject to the king only. In the same way, parliamentary jurisdiction could not extend over the American colonies because they had no representation in that body.¹⁴

Still, there was a provision concerning Ireland that British policymakers sought to apply as a justification for their authority in America. Parliamentary statutes could bind the Irish people in specific cases if the statute expressly named them. Yet, Wilson observed that British judges explicitly stated that this provision only applied to conquered lands such as Ireland. Wilson argued, therefore, that this precedent could not apply to America because they did not enter the English Empire by conquest but by colonization. The people of America then were entitled to the

¹⁰ The British constitution does not exist as a written document as it does in the American system. The British constitution refers to a loose collection of precedents and long-held principles that both legitimized and limited the various branches of British government. Although it was not written in the manner of the American Constitution, British policymakers were no less free from its constraints.

¹¹ Wilson, “Considerations,” 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

same rights as all Englishmen.¹⁵

The Wilson and Jefferson pamphlets began to circulate less than one month before the first meeting of Congress. Perhaps some of the delegates, wearied from their journeys, read these words as they arrived in Philadelphia. In any case, the same thoughts gripped the minds of these men as expressed even in their earliest correspondence before the meetings began in September. Some articulated their optimism that the Congress would be a success. John Adams recorded the sentiment of Richard Henry Lee that the representatives should call for the repeal of the Intolerable Acts and alter the Massachusetts Constitution.¹⁶ At a dinner party with several of the delegates who had already arrived in Philadelphia by 3 September, Adams recounted that Lee seemed “absolutely certain, that the Ship which carries home the Resolution will bring back the Redress.”¹⁷ Lee no doubt based his assumption on the effectiveness of past American action against other parliamentary legislation, but he could not have grasped how complicated Anglo-American relations had become by 1774.

Addressing parliamentary action against Massachusetts was the first order of business for Congress as they began to debate the authority of Parliament over the colonies. Adams was vocal in arguing that the lawmaking power over the colonies resided only in the local legislatures. James Duane, a New York delegate, confirmed Adams’s argument, adding that the charters for the colonies “are Compacts between the Crown and the People.”¹⁸ The crown then was solely responsible for the political existence of the colonies, and Parliament had no constitutional right to make laws for the American people. On this ground Adams asserted that the rights of British

¹⁵ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁶ Richard Henry Lee served as a Virginia delegate to both the First and Second Continental Congress. He is famous for proposing the resolution for American independence in June 1776.

¹⁷ Diary of John Adams, 3 September 1774 in Paul E. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1978), 1:7 (hereafter *LDC*).

¹⁸ John Adams’s Notes on Debates, 7 September 1774 in *ibid.*, 1:47.

America could be “reduce[d] . . . to one. All the Acts of Parliament made since . . . the Emigration of our Ancestors . . . are violations of our Rights.”¹⁹ These proceedings would eventually provide the voice of the final resolves of the First Continental Congress. In these resolves, they argued that, because they did not and could not enjoy proper representation in Parliament, they could not lawfully accept the authority of that body. Instead, they retained the right to tax themselves by the authority of their own local legislative bodies.²⁰

By the second day of Congress, the delegates had resolved to appoint a committee to “state the Rights of the Colonies, the several Instances in which they have been violated & infringed and the means most proper to obtain Redress.”²¹ The proceedings of this committee largely concerned the question of whether Parliament had the right to regulate external trade in the British Empire. James Duane proposed that the committee concede this right to Parliament but warned that they must be careful “to establish a Principle upon which we can submit this Authority to Parliament without the Danger of . . . their pleading a Right to bind [the colonies] in all Cases whatsoever.”²² Several committee members including Adams and John Dickinson of Pennsylvania were ready to relinquish this right to Parliament, but others remained adamantly opposed. Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina for example remained “violent against allowing Parliament any Power of regulating Trade, or allowing that they have any Thing to do with Us.”²³ Gadsden argued that Parliament had already abused this power to lay taxes on the American colonies and they would do it again. “A Right of regulating Trade,” he said, “is a

¹⁹ Ibid., 1:48.

²⁰ Continental Congress, “Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress,” 1774 in Greene, ed., *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution* (New York: Norton & Company, 1975), 244-245; For further reference on the debates concerning these resolutions see James Duane’s Speech to The Committee on Rights, 8 September 1774 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:51-53.

²¹ James Duane’s Notes of Debates, 6 September 1774 in *ibid.*, 1:31.

²² James Duane’s Proposition Before the Committee on Rights, 7-22 September 1774 in *ibid.*, 1:38.

²³ Diary of John Adams, 14 September 1774 in *ibid.*, 1:68.

Right of Legislation, and a Right of Legislation in one Case, is a Right in all.”²⁴

These deliberations in the Committee on Rights spilled over into the general assembly of delegates over the debate of Joseph Galloway’s Plan of Union.²⁵ A major concern of the debate concentrated on which political body should hold the right to regulate trade within the empire. It was apparent that individual legislatures in the colonies did not possess the jurisdiction or the means to regulate trade in the entire empire. Adams, Duane, and others put forth their arguments that they could allow this power to stay in the hands of Parliament while barring their authority to tax the colonies or regulate internal affairs. Echoing Gadsden, others objected, saying that “Parliament and Ministry is wicked, and corrupt and will take Advantage of such Declarations to tax us – and will also Reason from this Acknowledgment, to further Power over us.”²⁶ Galloway offered a compromise. He argued Congress to recommend the creation of a new legislative body made up of representatives from all the British colonies that would have the power to regulate trade within the empire.²⁷

In the end, Galloway failed to push his plan through Congress. Adams and Dickinson’s persuasion won on this issue, and Congress resolved to concede the right to regulate commerce outside of the North American colonies to Parliament in order to ensure that all members of the English Empire received the benefits of this exchange.²⁸ Careful to ensure that the wording did not betray any hint of conciliation to the authority of Parliament, Congress added that they

²⁴ Ibid., 1:68.

²⁵ Joseph Galloway proposed this Plan as a way of maintaining the authority of the government of Great Britain while also allowing Americans to have a voice in imperial policymaking. His Plan of Union would have established an assembly of representatives from each of the thirteen colonies. This Grand Council would be an “inferior and distinct Branch of the British Legislature” in charge of regulating trade and the internal affairs of the American colonies. Joseph Galloway’s Plan of Union, 28 September 1774 in *ibid.*, 1:117-119.

²⁶ John Adams’s Notes of Debates, 28 September 1774 in *ibid.*, 1:111. For a brief discussion of Congress’s debate over Galloway’s Plan of Union see Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins*, 135-136.

²⁷ John Adams’s Notes of Debates, 28 September 1774 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:110-112. See also Joseph Galloway’s Plan of Union, 28 September 1774 in *ibid.*, 1:117-119.

²⁸ Continental Congress, “Declarations and Resolves,” in Greene, *Colonies to Nation*, 245.

conceded this right only because of “the necessity of the case.”²⁹

Through all this, it is important to note that the delegates of the First Continental Congress were not interested in independence from Great Britain. They were mainly interested in achieving a repeal of the Intolerable Acts and a definite acknowledgment that Parliament had no authority to tax American colonies. Wilson carefully reminded his readers that a denial of the authority of Parliament did not mean a denial of any political connection between America and Britain.³⁰ In the same way, Duane insisted that the foremost goal of the Congress should be a “firm Union between the Parent State and her Colonies.”³¹

Nevertheless, the events of April 1775 complicated the matter. One would think that the outbreak of war would threaten the delegates’ loyalty to the king and commitment to reconciliation. Yet, the letters and diaries of several delegates indicate that even after hostilities broke out in Lexington and Concord, they continued to seek reconciliation and affirm their allegiance to the king. The Second Continental Congress issued a declaration in July 1775 in order to explain their reasons for raising an army. Although they were committing to armed resistance to the British government, they insisted that Congress had not “raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great-Britain and establishing independent states.”³² This sentiment was evident in the proceedings in Congress as well. In a debate over a resolution to raise an army in support of Massachusetts, John Rutledge of South Carolina insisted that the

²⁹ Ibid. See also Thomas Jefferson to John Randolph, 25 August 1775, Monticello in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 749. In this letter, Jefferson expressed another motivation why the delegates chose to allow Parliament to regulate commerce in America. “The Congress,” he wrote, “stated the lowest terms they thought possible to be accepted, in order to convince the world they were not unreasonable. They gave up the monopoly and regulation of trade, and all acts of Parliament prior to 1764.” Congress hoped giving ground on this issue would make reconciliation more likely.

³⁰ Wilson, “Considerations,” 27; For another example of this sentiment see John Zubly’s Diary, 16 September 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 2:21.

³¹ James Duane’s Proposition Before the Committee of Rights in *ibid.*, 1:38.

³² Continental Congress, “A Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North-America now met in General Congress at Philadelphia; Setting forth the Causes and Necessity of their Taking up Arms” (Newport: S. Southwick, 1775), 10.

purpose of such an army be clear. He asked the question that must have been on the minds of others in the room. By raising an army against their own government, were they not declaring independence?³³ Adams was careful to reassure him that they were not aiming at total independence: “. . . independence on Parliament is absolutely to be averrd in the Americans [*sic*], but a de-pendence on the Crown is what We own.”³⁴ Adams made an important distinction here. The delegates of Congress fought to establish their independence from Parliament, but they did not intend to deny their dependence on the crown. At least in the minds of the delegates, war did not constitute a break with the British government. The American colonies remained firmly connected to the British Empire through their affection and commitment to the king.

This sentiment came from a profound loyalty to the crown. Wilson’s pamphlet explained the constitutional background for their allegiance. When settlers came to America from Britain, they took the land in the name of the king by his authority. He granted them royal charters without the input of Parliament. According to Wilson, they did not consider themselves subjects of Parliament, but only of the king.³⁵ Duane also confirmed Wilson’s observation, writing Americans owe the king their allegiance no less than his subjects in England.³⁶ Their persistent loyalty led many delegates to continue to advocate for reconciliation.

After April 1775, the Second Continental Congress continued to maintain their loyalty. In perhaps one of the best examples of this observation, the North Carolina delegates expressed their devotion to the king in a circular letter sent to the committees in North Carolina. They insisted that their constituents consider George III as their “rightful . . . Sovereign” and that they “dare every danger and difficulty in support of his person . . . and consider every man as a traitor

³³ Silas Deane’s Diary, 16 May 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:351.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:352.

³⁵ Wilson, “Considerations,” 28-30.

³⁶ James Duane’s Proposition Before the Committee on Rights in Smith, *LDC*, 1:38.

to his King, who . . . attempts to invade those glorious revolution principles which placed him on the throne”³⁷ Even in the midst of war with the king’s troops, these delegates insisted that they did not act out of contempt for royal authority but against traitors to his majesty. John Dickinson called for the raising of troops, and, in the same breath, he also promoted a petition that would express their loyalty to the king.³⁸ In John Jay’s draft of the proposed petition, he expressed their loyalty even in the face of disappointment at the king’s reactions to their previous petitions and complaints.³⁹

It is peculiar that Congress chose to send their petitions to the king for the redress of abusive acts of Parliament. The First and Second Continental Congress sent petitions to the crown, addresses to the people of England and the people of Ireland, a letter to the mayor of London, a dispatch to the Assembly of Jamaica, and many other addresses expressing their grievances and asking for assistance.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, they never found it useful even to discuss writing a petition to Parliament although that body was the source of the conflict. Instead, they repeatedly recommended petitioning the king with a list of grievances that had befallen the colonies as a result of Parliament’s cruelties.⁴¹ It may have been more effective to convince

³⁷ North Carolina Delegates to the North Carolina Committees, 19 June 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:514. Many Americans argued that they served the king best by resisting the persecution of the English government. This was because they believed they fought to preserve the same principles that guided the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the revolution that established the protestant monarchy of William and Mary and eventually the Hanoverian succession. Though the Hanoverians and William were foreigners, their reign over England was justified precisely because they adhered to Protestantism and the principles that made up the core of British revolutionary politics. For more information see McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*, chapter 3, “Remembrance of King’s Past,” 85-104, especially pages 82-92.

³⁸ John Dickinson’s Notes for a Speech in Congress, 23-25? May 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:375.

³⁹ John Jay’s Draft Petition to the King, 3-19? June 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:440-441. John Jay served as a New York delegate to the First Continental Congress and as the president of the Continental Congress beginning in 1778. He is known for his role in negotiating the Jay Treaty of 1794 and for serving as the first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

⁴⁰ Samuel Ward’s List of Measures Adopted by Congress, 31? July 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:686. For a brief discussion of the relationship between the Continental Congress and Jamaica see Greene, *The Constitutional Origins*, 170. For a discussion of Irish sympathy to the American cause, see Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 255-256.

⁴¹ Jefferson, “A Summary View,” 5.

Parliament of the illegality of their actions. Perhaps a petition to that body would appear as a submission to its authority. Rather than addressing Parliament, they chose to speak to the king, as he embodied their political connection to Great Britain.

Congress also chose to address the king in their petitions, because they saw him as their mediator and protector. Jefferson called for their royal mediator to intercede on their behalf in a passionate plea: “. . . and we do earnestly entreat his majesty, as yet the only mediatory power between the several states of the British Empire, to recommend to his parliament of Great Britain the total revocation of these acts.”⁴² Such language was present in the debates in Congress as well. Virginia delegate Edmund Pendleton proposed that they ask the crown in their petition to “interpose his Roial [*sic*] Influence for Opening a treaty of Accommodation between his Subjects there & here”⁴³ But they perceived George III as more than a mediator. They thought of him as their father and protector. In John Jay’s draft, the language appealed to familial affection between the crown and the colonies as between father and child.⁴⁴ Before and after Lexington and Concord, they called to their father for protection from their parliamentary oppressors.

At times, though, the executive branch of the English government was plainly to blame for some of the grievances that the colonists suffered. In these cases, the delegates used careful language to implicate the royal ministers rather than the king himself. In the resolves of the First Continental Congress, they blamed the king’s counselors for ignoring their repeated petitions as if they withheld their protestations from the king.⁴⁵ In their mind, if the wicked ministers had not hidden the condition of his majesty’s subjects, the king would certainly have acted swiftly for

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴³ Edmund Pendleton’s Proposed Resolutions, 24-26 May 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:404.

⁴⁴ “That reposing the utmost Confidence in the paternal Care of their Prince and the Justice of the British Nation they were urged by the perilous Situations of the Liberties to solicit his Majesty’s Attention by their late Petition to their real & unmerited Greivances [*sic*], and to request his royal interposition on their behalf.” John Jay’s Draft Petition to the King, 3-19? June 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:440.

⁴⁵ Continental Congress, “Declaration and Resolves” in Greene, *Colonies to Nation*, 244.

their protection. This image of corrupt advisers was a motif in Jefferson's pamphlet, which urged his majesty to reject his ministers' advice and "to think and to act for [himself] and [his] people."⁴⁶ At the beginning of the meeting of the First Continental Congress, Richard Henry Lee argued that they should advise his majesty to dismiss his corrupt counselors. Without their influence, they believed, the protector would hear their grievances and act quickly in their favor.⁴⁷ Benjamin Harrison of Virginia was more direct and personal in his tones, calling for "a constitutional Death to the Lords Bute, Mansfield and North."⁴⁸

Because the king maintained control of the British army in America, it would seem reasonable to condemn the king once sustained fighting broke out in April 1775. Nevertheless, the delegates continued to avoid reference to George III himself in relation to military affairs. They instead blamed his ministers and maintained their constitutional ties with the king. Samuel Ward referred to British soldiers as "ministerial Troops" avoiding their customary designation as the king's troops.⁴⁹ The North Carolina delegates also avoided the king's name in connection with the military clashes in Massachusetts. Instead, they repeatedly referred to the first minister, Lord North.⁵⁰ Thomas Cushing, writing to John Dickinson when a military clash seemed eminent in his home colony of Massachusetts, also avoided connecting the king to the crisis. "You may rest assured," he wrote, "that they [Massachusetts] never will assume Government unless the

⁴⁶ Jefferson, "A Summary View," 22.

⁴⁷ Diary of John Adams, 3 September 1774 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:7. Adams noted Lee's argument in Congress that they "should inform his Majesty, that We never can be happy, while the Lords Bute, Mansfield, and North are his Confidants and Councillors."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:8. Here, Harrison indicted Great Britain's highest ranking ministers by name, but some delegates believed that ministerial corruption extended to every part of the imperial bureaucracy as well. Jefferson wrote in 1775 that the "Ministry have been deceived by their officers on this side of the water." Delegates did not trust the king's officials no matter their rank, duties, or location. Thomas Jefferson to John Randolph, 25 August 1775, Monticello in Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 749.

⁴⁹ Samuel Ward's List of Measures Adopted by Congress, 31? July 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:686. Samuel Ward was a Rhode Island delegate to the First Continental Congress.

⁵⁰ North Carolina Delegates to the North Carolina Committees, 19 June 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:512-514.

Ministry should determine and Execute the late Acts by a Military force”⁵¹ The delegates’ word choices indicate that they did not consider the monarch responsible for military action against America.

Even when they directly referred to George III’s actions, most delegates were careful only to use the word “ministry” in the king’s place. In reference to the king’s aggressive speech at the opening of Parliament in November 1774, Richard Henry Lee wrote, “The wicked violence of Ministry is so clearly expressed, as to leave no doubt of their fatal determination to ruin both Countries.”⁵² He wrote as if they should not hold George III himself responsible for his own words, because he spoke under the guidance of his wicked ministers. An unknown delegate gave a speech in the early days of the Second Continental Congress accusing the royal ministers of duplicitous actions. At first, it seemed that the petition of the First Continental Congress would receive due consideration. Nevertheless, soon after this promise, a private letter from the Secretary of State of England declared “the Congress illegal,” and Americans’ grievances “pretended.”⁵³ Still, the unknown delegate never held the king himself responsible for these actions. In fact, he went out of his way to indict Parliament for being “prepared to support every one of their [the ministry’s] measures,”⁵⁴ He criticized both Parliament and the ministers, but the question never arose whether George III supported or originated any of these measures.

The delegates maintained their loyalty to the king even when it had already become clear that he had chosen a path of war with the colonies. They continued to see him as their father and protector. Wilson articulated this point while giving reasons for the colonists’ continued loyalty to the king. He argued that “the Colonists ought to be dependent on the King, because they have

⁵¹ Thomas Cushing to John Dickinson, 13 February 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:311.

⁵² Richard Henry Lee to Arthur Lee, 24 February 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:313.

⁵³ Fragment of a Speech in Congress, May 1775 in *ibid.*, 1:427.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:427; For another example of this kind of language see Continental Congress, “Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms.”

hitherto enjoyed, and still continue to enjoy his protection.”⁵⁵ The delegates repeatedly appealed to this principle in their petitions to the king. By July 1775, the promise of protection seemed to be the last remaining support for continued loyalty to the monarchy.

In hindsight, it seems absurd to think of the king as a protector while he was actively waging war. But for the American delegates, it seems that words spoke louder than actions. A series of public statements from George III between September 1775 and March 1776 effectively declared the colonies outside of his protection. With each offense, more and more delegates held the crown in deeper contempt, eroding the bonds of affection that held the empire together. It was the king’s words in the following months that severed this last remaining bond and set the majority of the delegates on a course for independence.

In mid-September 1775, Congress received word that the people of London along with the mayor had written a petition to the king in July respectfully entreating him to desist from the use of military force against the American colonies.⁵⁶ George III quickly answered the people of London, saying that he was determined to continue in his present course as long as there remained any resistance in America.⁵⁷ His words inspired the first instances of direct criticism among the delegates.⁵⁸ Eliphalet Dyer of Connecticut observed that “By the last accounts from England it appears the K[in]g is Obstinate bent to prosecute the Warr against Americans.”⁵⁹ John Adams also showed his contempt for the king. With biting sarcasm, he referred to the

⁵⁵ Wilson, “Considerations,” 31.

⁵⁶ See “Address of the Corporation of London to the King,” 7 July 1775 in Paul Force, et. al., ed. *American Archives: Documents of the American Revolution, 1774-1776* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Libraries, 2004), 2:1602-1603, <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/amarch/> (accessed 25 March 2013). The City of London sympathized with American patriots and petitioned the king on their behalf on multiple occasions. For a brief discussion of the City of London’s support see Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 256.

⁵⁷ See “His Majesty’s Answer,” 7 July 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:1603.

⁵⁸ There is one notable exception to this observation. Late in August 1774, Edward Rutledge, the youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence, expressed contempt for the king, saying that he was untrustworthy. See the Diary of John Adams, 30 August 1774 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:4.

⁵⁹ Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, 15 September 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:14-15.

king's answer to the London petition as "Proof of his Clemency."⁶⁰ The king's answer put the two sides at an impasse. If his majesty succeeded in his goals, congressional radicals believed they faced total subjection. Samuel Ward made this observation in a letter to George Washington in September 1775.⁶¹ Ward observed that that diplomatic avenues would likely be insufficient to establish American liberties. This truth put more pressure on Washington as military affairs became increasingly more important by September 1775.

Other delegates expressed their irritation over the king's words, but they displayed a somewhat more forgiving attitude. Robert Livingston did not refrain from directly criticizing the king, but chose to employ milder language: "Their [*sic*] does not seem to be any great appearance of relaxation in his answer," he wrote.⁶² He expressed the importance of the relationship of the colonies to their king along with his fear that "his majesty plays too carelessly." Another delegate from Virginia believed there was still hope for reconciliation despite the king's answer to the people of London.⁶³ The king's words eroded the loyalty of the delegates. For the first time, they openly criticized George III rather than blaming his ministers. It is possible that ideas of independence began to form in some of their minds as a result of this event, but their letters do not record this sentiment. Reconciliation was still within grasp for the majority of the delegates, but their esteem for their father protector had begun to decline.

The delegates' criticism of the king became both more intense and more formal as a result of a proclamation from the king only two months after his answer to the London petition.

⁶⁰ John Adams to James Warren, 17 September 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:24. Adams's sarcasm is certain from the context of this letter and his convictions concerning the king and American rights before and after this incident.

⁶¹ "By the Kings Answer to the Petition of the Lord Mayor Aldermen & commons of the City of London it appears He is determined to pursue & enforce his Measures. God be thanked that however severe the Contest may prove We are now in such a happy Way that the End must be the Establishment of American Liberty." Samuel Ward to George Washington, 17 September 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:27.

⁶² Robert R. Livingston, Jr. to John Stevens, 20 September 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:35.

⁶³ Virginia Delegate to Unknown, September 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:87. This letter likely came after the delegates received word of the king's answer to the London petition but before they received more correspondence from London, which described the King's attitude more fully.

In August 1775, George III issued “A Proclamation For suppressing Rebellion and Sedition.”⁶⁴ This proclamation declared the American colonies to be in “open and avowed” rebellion and called on loyalists and royal officers to suppress any instance of rebellion and bring traitors to justice.⁶⁵ The king’s punitive words made a personal attack on the members of Congress. The king believed that his subjects in North America were “misled by dangerous and ill-designing Men.”⁶⁶ He also insisted that these men had forgotten “the Allegiance which they owe to the Power that has protected and sustained them.”⁶⁷ Many delegates found this deeply offensive. They had taken care to express their allegiance to the crown in all their correspondence and even encouraged their constituents to oppose any seditious words against the king.⁶⁸

The king’s use of the word “avowed” in describing their rebellion was also contrary to the delegates’ writings. They had sent repeated petitions explaining their desire for reconciliation. In another attack on the delegates, the monarch insisted that “such Rebellion hath been much promoted and encouraged by the traitorous Correspondence, Counsels, and Comfort of divers wicked and desperate Persons within this Realm”⁶⁹ The king’s proclamation demonstrated his view of Americans in general and the Continental Congress in particular.

From the viewpoint of the congressional delegates, it is no wonder that the king’s words amplified their contempt and inspired both formal and private criticism. When the news came to America in late October, it changed the opinions of many delegates. Samuel Ward observed that

⁶⁴ King George III, “By the King, A Proclamation, for Suppressing Rebellion” (Boston, 1775). See also Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 257-258. According to Maier, aside from declaring Americans to be rebels, the king may have intended the Proclamation to discourage growing support for America within Britain.

⁶⁵ King George III, “By the King, A Proclamation, for Suppressing Rebellion.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* This statement can also refer to other patriot leaders in America, but their later writings reveal that the delegates believed it referred to themselves.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ See North Carolina Delegates to the North Carolina Committees, 19 June 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 1:514.

⁶⁹ King George III, “By the King, A Proclamation, for Suppressing Rebellion.”

the proclamation “declared” them all “to be Rebels in effect tho not in express Terms.”⁷⁰ Rather than discouraging him, the accusation relieved Ward because he knew that the king’s words would produce “a most happy Effect here for those who hoped for Redress from our Petitions now give them up & heartily join with us in carrying on the War vigorously.”⁷¹ Ward had evidently been moving away from reconciliation for some time, but the August Proclamation brought several delegates to his side. This proclamation only served to harden American resistance and created a growing movement in Congress to abandon reconciliation and oppose not only parliamentary authority but royal allegiance as well.

Reconciliation no longer seemed possible for many delegates. In Ward’s understanding, the king had convinced many moderates that they had been “pursuing a Phantom and that their only Safety is a vigorous determin[e]d Defence.”⁷² He even gave an example of one of his fellow delegate’s confession of such a change of heart.⁷³ The arrival of the Proclamation was a critical moment for the delegates. Joseph Hewes of North Carolina remarked that the ships that brought the Proclamation brought few letters from their friends in England. It was almost as if the Proclamation, he thought, deterred them from writing anything concerning politics, speaking to the importance of the Proclamation in the delegates’ minds.⁷⁴

Out of these proceedings, Congress’s activity in the war again became more important as diplomatic avenues became more strained. Nevertheless, a significant group of delegates continued to desire reconciliation. In another letter, Ward lamented the disunity in Congress concerning the war. Many delegates were apprehensive to approve aggressive actions for fear of

⁷⁰ Samuel Ward to Deborah Ward, 1 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:285-286.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2:286.

⁷² Samuel Ward to Henry Ward, 2 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:291.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Joseph Hewes to James Iredell, 9 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:323. Samuel Ward also suggested the king’s proclamation as a cause for the silence of their English correspondents. Samuel Ward to Henry Ward, 2 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:291.

ultimately alienating the king. Congress could have done much more, Ward argued, if they had supported the war from the beginning “with vigor.”⁷⁵ Yet, by summer of 1776, most of the delegates would join Ward’s persuasion. More delegates would abandon reconciliation as events unfolded. Support for the war grew as Americans’ relationship with the crown continued to deteriorate.

The Continental Congress formally criticized the crown’s words in a Resolution published on 6 December 1775. They sought to plead the innocence of the colonies and avoid the punishment that they believed would be unjust. In this resolution, Congress challenged several of the monarch’s assumptions. Most notably, they took offense to the accusation that they had forgotten the allegiance, which they owed to the “power that has protected and sustained us.”⁷⁶ Congress believed the king was intentionally vague with his language on this point. The statement does not specify exactly to whom they owed this allegiance. The resolution repeated that they never owed that allegiance to Parliament. American politicians had been arguing this point for most of the past twelve years and especially in the preceding year. As for their allegiance to the king, they claimed “Our words have ever avowed it – our conduct has ever been consistent with it.”⁷⁷ It is true that their official correspondence with king and others had been consistently loyal to the crown. They denied any desire to declare independence and were careful to avoid all criticism of George III himself. Yet, from the perspective of the king and the rest of the British government, their actions may not have been consistent with their words. Yet, in the minds of the delegates, they were blameless, and the king’s accusations were unjustified.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Continental Congress, “The Answer of the Congress to the King’s Proclamation,” 6 December 1775 (New York, 1775).

⁷⁷ Ibid. Congress’s use of the word “avowed” here may be significant. The king had insisted that Americans, and perhaps Congress in particular, were in “open and avowed rebellion.” Congress insisted, using the king’s own words against him, that they had only expressed avowed loyalty.

The delegates also criticized the king for his vague use of the word “rebellion.” The proclamation called for royal officials and other loyal Americans to bring anyone in rebellion to just punishment. But Congress argued that there was no legal definition for who was in rebellion or not. Therefore, royal officials might apprehend anyone they pleased. This infusion of power in the hands of British officials appeared to the delegates as another step in establishing tyranny over the American colonies. In order to prevent this unjust punishment, Congress pledged to do everything in its power to retaliate against any person or group who persecuted American patriots.⁷⁸ Their conclusion is quite significant. Not only did the delegates directly criticize the king, but they pledged to oppose his instructions by whatever means at their disposal. Their words mark a shift in the Congress’s relationship with their monarch. Reconciliation by any acceptable means seemed increasingly unlikely.

The August Proclamation remained on the minds of the delegates many months later. On 15 May 1776, Congress issued a resolution recommending that each of the colonies establish new governments for themselves. Its preamble was the subject of much debate in Congress. It stated the reasoning for the recommendation: “Whereas his Britannic Majesty, in conjunction with the Lords and Commons of Great-Britain, has, by a late Act of Parliament, excluded the inhabitants of these United Colonies from the protection of his crown”⁷⁹ In the delegates’ viewpoint, this statement constituted the spirit of the August Proclamation. In declaring the colonies to be in open rebellion, he also declared them outside of his protection. Royal protection, as Wilson pointed out, was the basis for colonial affection and allegiance to the crown.⁸⁰ In the absence of his protection, the delegates concluded that remaining under British

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Continental Congress, In Congress, 15 May, 1776, “Whereas His Britannic Majesty” (Philadelphia: Dunlap, 1776).

⁸⁰ Wilson, “Considerations,” 31.

government “appear[ed] absolutely irreconcilable [*sic*] to reason and good conscience” and that the “authority under the said Crown should be totally suppressed”⁸¹ By this time, the king’s words had already driven them to recommend that the colonies tear down royal government within their individual jurisdictions.

The August Proclamation also had profound implications for the Declaration of Independence, which came less than two months after Congress’s 15 May resolution. John Adams, Richard Henry Lee, and other radicals constitutionally justified a break from their dependence on the crown because, though they had once “been bound to [the crown] by allegiance . . . this bond was now dissolved by his assent to the late act of parliament, by which he declares us out of his protection.”⁸² The radicals included more legal justification for independence in their argument, claiming that “allegiance and protection are reciprocal, the one ceasing when the other is withdrawn.”⁸³ It was not even necessary for Congress to manufacture their independence from the king, because he had given them up by his own words. Congress cited the Proclamation in the Declaration of Independence as well. They protested the monarch’s action of “abdicat[ing] government here by declaring us out of his protection.”⁸⁴ Besides its obvious constitutional implications, this action had a deeply personal significance for many Americans. It contributed to a bitter sense of betrayal on the part of the king, who had a duty to protect American liberty. This betrayal corroded the delegate’s opinion of the crown and moved them closer to independence. The Proclamation may have been all that was necessary to erode fully American confidence in royal authority, but several other offenses from George III also motivated this change in many delegates’ minds.

⁸¹ Continental Congress, “Whereas His Britannic Majesty.”

⁸² Thomas Jefferson’s Notes of Proceedings in Congress, 7-28 June 1776 in Smith, *LDC*, 4:161-162.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4:162.

⁸⁴ Continental Congress, The Declaration of Independence.

In some ways, the king revealed his attitude passively rather than actively. The crown, viewing the Continental Congress as an extralegal assembly, refused to receive its delegates or its petitions. This inspired frustration among many delegates, as they felt disrespected. John Hancock expressed his irritation at the king's silence, concluding that the delegates would never receive an answer to their grievances.⁸⁵ Samuel Adams predicted that the conflict would only become more intense as Congress's petitions had "been treated with insolent Contempt" in the royal court. He called George III a tyrant who had closed his ears and his heart to the sufferings of his people.⁸⁶ The king's passivity inspired enough contempt to include it as a grievance in the Declaration of Independence as well.⁸⁷ Their emotions were strong enough on this point to move them to accuse George III of tyranny: "A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people."⁸⁸ This is one of only two instances in the Declaration in which the delegates referred to King George III as a tyrant.⁸⁹ This speaks to the passion, anger, and sense of betrayal that the Congress experienced as a result of the king's inaction.

Letters from correspondents in England also helped to reform the delegates' image of the

⁸⁵ John Hancock to James Bowdoin, Sr., 9 November 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 2:321. Hancock also surmised that the colonies "must work out our own Salvation" in the absence of royal intervention. See also Josiah Bartlett to the New Hampshire Committee of Safety, 13 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:324. Here, Bartlett also expressed similar conclusions. Having received word from correspondents in England that the king still refused to hear their petition as of 13 November, he concluded that their petitions would likely come to nothing. For yet another example of this sentiment see Joseph Hewes to James Bowdoin, Sr., 9 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:324.

⁸⁶ Samuel Adams to James Bowdoin, Sr., 16 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:352.

⁸⁷ "In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered by repeated injury." Continental Congress, Declaration of Independence.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration included even more emotional language in this paragraph. He wrote, "Future ages will scarcely believe that the hardiness of one man adventured, within the short compass of twelve years only, to lay a foundation so broad & so undisguised for tyranny over a people fostered & fixed in principles of freedom." Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the Proceedings in Congress, 1 July 1776 in Smith, *LDC*, 4:363.

⁸⁹ The other reference to tyranny was in a grievance in which Congress criticized the king for forcing his people to "relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature" in exchange for the passing of laws to relieve large numbers of people. This is likely in reference to Congress's petitions for the redress of the Intolerable Acts. Thus, it provides another example of the delegates' contempt for the king due to this matter. Continental Congress, Declaration of Independence.

king. Letters from friends and their own envoys described the monarch's disposition toward the Continental Congress and the American colonies. The accuracy of their portrayals is not at issue here. Delegates effectively spoke and acted on the assumptions of their English correspondents whether their information was accurate or not. Ward received a letter from an American in England which reported that the crown was "unalterably determined let the Consequences be what it would to compel the colonies to absolute Obedience."⁹⁰ This alleged quotation from the king made its way into the writings of several delegates. Samuel Adams used these exact words in a letter to another Massachusetts delegate, James Bowdoin, to describe the monarch's intentions.⁹¹ Jefferson also referred to correspondents: "We are told and every thing proves it true that he [the king] is the bitterest enemy we have."⁹²

These letters inspired great contempt for the crown among the delegates. Holding both the king and his ministers in disdain, Jefferson wrote that the whole royal court was actively conspiring against them.⁹³ Ward expressed a similar sentiment. He wrote that a "faithful & very sensible Friend in England" told him that the king "out does Lord Mansfield himself in Dissimulation & Lust for Power."⁹⁴ This marks an important change in the delegates' words concerning George III. Before August 1775, they generally limited their criticism to the royal ministers, rarely portraying the king himself in an unfavorable light. At this time, those roles reversed in the mind of many delegates. To them, the king expressed even more tyrannical tendencies than his corrupt ministers. Ward wrote that the sovereign "is at the Head of the

⁹⁰ Samuel Ward to Henry Ward, 16 November 1775 in Smith, *LDC*, 2:335.

⁹¹ Samuel Adams to James Bowdoin, 16 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:352. Note that Adams wrote these words on the same day as Ward. This means that he and Ward either read the same letter or Ward told Adams of these words in his recent correspondence. Adams words may provide a clue. He says "the Tyrant . . . *I am told*, explicitly declared, that 'Let the Consequences be . . .'" (emphasis mine). This may indicate that he heard of these events second hand.

⁹² Thomas Jefferson to John Randolph, 29 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:403.

⁹³ "His minister is able, and that satisfies me that ignorance or wickedness somewhere controls him." *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Samuel Ward to Henry Ward, 11 October 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:164.

violent Measures pursued & planning.”⁹⁵ In many delegates’ minds, royal ministers were no longer the only ones to blame. The king himself took the lead role in their oppression.

Disdain for the king himself led delegates much closer to independence. Jefferson wrote that independence “is now pressed upon us by the measures adopted as if they were afraid we would not take it.”⁹⁶ He believed that the actions of the king were practically *insisting* that they embrace independence. He lamented the crown’s attitude, wishing that he would be more conciliatory. Jefferson cared about the fate of his British brethren, but he refused to submit to royal oppression.⁹⁷ “Believe me dear Sir,” he continued:

there is not in the British empire a man who more cordially loves a Union with Gr. Britain than I do. But by the god that made me I will cease to exist before I yield to a connection on such terms as the British parliament propose and in this I think I speak the sentiments of America.⁹⁸

This emotional reaction speaks to the depth of Jefferson’s feelings of betrayal and contempt for the king.

The delegates’ contempt only continued to rise in January 1776 when they received the text of a speech that the king gave before Parliament on 26 October. George III insisted that the Continental Congress had levied war against his majesty’s troops for the purpose of securing independence.⁹⁹ This was in direct defiance to every petition that the delegates had sent to the king over the past sixteen months, and they naturally took offense at this accusation.¹⁰⁰ It was in

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Thomas Jefferson to John Randolph, 29 November 1775 in *ibid.*, 2:403.

⁹⁷ “It is an immense misfortune to the whole empire to have a king of such a disposition at such a time.”
Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ George III, King of Great Britain, “King’s Speech to Both Houses,” 26 October 1775 in Force, *American Archives*, 6:1-2. “The rebellious war now levied is become more general, and is manifestly carried on for the purpose of establishing an independent Empire. I need not dwell upon the fatal effects of the success of such a plan. The object is too important, the spirit of the British nation too high, the resources with which God hath blessed her too numerous, to give up so many Colonies which she has planted with great industry, nursed with great tenderness, encouraged with many commercial advantages, and protected and defended at much expense of blood and treasure.”

¹⁰⁰ Again, from the king’s perspective there are several compelling reasons why he believed Congress had “openly avow[ed] their revolt.” He pointed out that they had raised an army and a navy, assumed control of the

reference to this offense that the radicals in Congress expressed their most heated and effective scorn for the monarch and began a wholehearted turn toward independence. Ward wrote of the October speech: “It is decisive; Every Man must now be convinced that under God our Safety depends wholly upon a brave, wise and determined Resistance.”¹⁰¹ The same delegate wrote to his daughter: “Thus you see my Love your Daddy’s Sentiments are confirmed that the Savage ever meant to make himself an absolute despotic Tyrant. May the Reward of his Hands & wicked Heart be given to him.”¹⁰² Francis Lightfoot Lee of Virginia also argued that the king’s speech should make it certain to everyone that the king only intended violence and suppression.¹⁰³ Samuel Adams blamed the crown as opposed to the ministry for the speech. He argued that the king “is his own Minister – that he follows the Dictates of his own Heart. If so, why should we cast the odium of distressing Mankind upon his Minions & Flatterers only. Guilt must lie at his Door. Divine Vengeance will fall on his head”¹⁰⁴ Here, Adams explicitly rejected the common practice of criticizing royal ministers while avoiding the name of the monarch himself.

Despite these radicals’ expressions, it is important to note that not all the delegates agreed with these convictions in January 1776. Several delegates still believed reconciliation was possible. A royal officer, Lord Drummond, came to Philadelphia hoping to convince as many delegates as possible that reconciliation was still on the table. He claimed that George III had authorized him to say that if America would cease hostilities, they would be free from

colonial treasury, and exercised “legislative, executive, and judicial powers.” Still, in the minds of the delegates, the king was either mistaken or intentionally speaking falsehood for the purpose of propaganda. For more detail, see *ibid.*, 6:1.

¹⁰¹ Samuel Ward to Nicholas Cooke, 7 January 1776 in Smith, *LDC*, 3:54. See also Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, 15 January 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:101. Dyer expressed a similar conviction in this letter writing that “From the Appearance of the Kings Speech All hopes of Reconciliation seem at an end”

¹⁰² Samuel Ward to His Daughter, 8 January 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:61.

¹⁰³ Francis Lightfoot Lee to Richard Henry Lee, 8 January 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:58.

¹⁰⁴ Samuel Adams to John Pitts, 12 January 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:84. Samuel Adams expressed the same sentiments in another letter on the same day. Samuel Adams to John Sullivan, 12 January 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:85.

parliamentary action in taxation and in internal affairs, but Britain would regulate trade. Any duties laid would contribute only to the colonies' treasuries.¹⁰⁵ Many delegates distrusted Drummond's claims, because they contradicted the king's own words. But some believed him. Dickinson proposed yet another "humble & dutiful Petition" to the crown, saying in explicit terms that they did not intend to fight for independence.¹⁰⁶ A committee drafted such a petition in late January, but Congress never adopted it. Richard Smith noted that the address "was very long, badly written and full against Independancy."¹⁰⁷ The majority of Congress did not wish to close the door on the possibility of independence and the issue did not come to a debate again in Congress. These events are significant, because they speak to a change in the minds of most delegates toward independence as a truly viable option. Coincidentally, the text of the king's October speech arrived in America in the same week that Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* began to circulate throughout the American colonies. As the delegates began to orient themselves to independence, so too did many others in the colonies.¹⁰⁸

Leading up to the resolution of 15 May, the delegates became increasingly inclined toward independence. Francis Lightfoot Lee considered the benefits that independence would bring to American trade and surmised that the past several months had shown that Americans were capable of supporting good self-government. He hoped that it could be possible to gain reconciliation on terms that would maintain American freedom, but he did not believe that the

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Lynch to George Washington, 16 January 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:101. Also see footnote in *ibid.*, 3:24.

¹⁰⁶ John Dickinson's Proposed Resolutions on a Petition to the King, 9-24? January 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:63.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Dickinson continued his efforts to promote an atmosphere more favorable to reconciliation in the Continental Congress and the American colonies. In February 1776, a committee headed by him produced an "Address to the inhabitants of the Colonies," which intended to deny that the king was leading a conspiracy to subject American liberty. Like Dickinson's January petition, Congress rejected this address, because it opposed the attitude of most Americans at the time. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins*, 153.

king's attitude would make it possible.¹⁰⁹ For Samuel Adams, the king was resolute. There would be no reconciliation without the sacrifice of American liberties. Therefore, the choice was between "Independence or Slavery."¹¹⁰ The delegates hotly debated the use of language that tended toward independence in their resolutions. In March 1776, Richard Henry Lee moved that Congress change the wording of a resolution concerning privateering. He wanted the preamble of the resolution to read that the king was the "Author of our Miseries" rather than the ministry.¹¹¹ The opposition claimed the change was "effectually severing the King from Us forever." The radicals in Congress did not deny this point.¹¹² Congress debated the resolution for four hours and eventually put it off for another time.

The 15 May Resolution was the culmination of all of these proceedings.¹¹³ It directly challenged the authority of the king. John Adams called it "the most important Resolution, that was taken in America."¹¹⁴ One could even argue that it was in effect a declaration of independence before the July Declaration, because it recommended that all the colonies "totally suppress" any political connection to the crown and set up new governments.¹¹⁵ It was a necessary step toward independence and created a noticeable stir in the colonies. But the delegates needed one last push from the king to begin their debate over a unified declaration of independence.

That push came in the beginning of June when the delegates received word of the king's answer to a second London petition. On 22 March, the people of London along with the mayor and other authorities, petitioned the king to stop hostilities in America. They cited the problems

¹⁰⁹ "There is such an inveteracy [*sic*] in the [king] & his advisers, that we need not expect other alternative, than slavery or separation." Francis Lightfoot Lee to Landon Carter, 19 March 1776 in Smith, *LDC*, 3:407-408.

¹¹⁰ Samuel Adams to James Warren, 16 April 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:540.

¹¹¹ Richard Smith's Diary, 22 March 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:427.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ See above discussion for a detailed explanation of the 15 May Resolution.

¹¹⁴ John Adams to James Warren, 15 May 1776 in *ibid.*, 3:676.

¹¹⁵ Continental Congress, "Whereas His Britannic Majesty."

that the war caused for British commerce and the swelling national debt, but they also appealed to fundamental American rights. They argued, “We humbly conceive that no people can be bound to surrender their rights and liberties as a return for protection.”¹¹⁶ The king was preparing to send a large military force to America to invade New York in July. The people of London implored the king to tell the colonists what he expected of them for reconciliation: “We humbly and earnestly beseech your Majesty, that . . . those just and honourable terms, which your Majesty . . . means to grant to the Colonies, may precede the dreadful operations of your armament.”¹¹⁷ In essence, they asked the king to strive once more for reconciliation before he came down on the American rebellion with the full might of the British Empire. Their monarch’s response was notably terse, almost brusque. He would not engage in more diplomacy with his rebellious colonies. Instead, he would continue with his plans until “the now existing rebellion is at an end. To obtain these salutary purposes, I will invariably pursue the most proper and effectual means.”¹¹⁸

The king’s answer to the second London petition caused an uproar in Congress. To most delegates, the king’s answer was clear; their monarch was fully against any attempt at reconciliation. Richard Henry Lee summarized the king’s words: “Force on his part &

¹¹⁶ “Address and Petition of Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Commons of the City of London to the King, praying for a change of policy in regard to the Colonies” in Force, *American Archives*, 5:462.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ George III, King of Great Britain, “Answer of the King to the Address,” 22 March 1776, in *ibid.*, 5:462-463. The king’s answer to the second London petition began softly, but ended with powerful language. “I deplore, with the deepest concern, the miseries which a great part of my subjects in North America have brought upon themselves by an unjustifiable resistance to the constitutional authority of this Kingdom; and I shall be ready and happy to alleviate those miseries, by acts of mercy and clemency, whenever that authority is established, and the now existing rebellion is at an end. To obtain these salutary purposes, I will invariably pursue the most proper and effectual means.” These last two sentences were what likely caused such an uproar among the delegates. His use of phrases such as “invariably pursue” speaks to the king’s determination to abandon any diplomatic means to conclude the conflict peacefully.

sub[mission] on ours is all he proposes.”¹¹⁹ The people of London had asked for the terms of American reconciliation and, in the minds of the delegates, the king had given his “Tyrannic” answer.¹²⁰ Josiah Bartlett pointed out that “by his answer we see he will have absolute submission or nothing.”¹²¹ The crown had finally made it explicit that the only course of action available was total suppression of American liberty.

The incident also served to unite Congress toward independence providing the final motivation for many moderate delegates. Robert Livingston noted that the king’s answer should convince more delegates that reconciliation was impossible. It came at an opportune time, he wrote, because the people were “very unfortunately divided.”¹²² Robert Morris provided an account of his own conversion. Through all the events of the past year, he had “never lost hope of reconciliation,” but the king’s answer changed his opinion.¹²³ He assured his correspondent that a declaration of independence would soon be at hand.¹²⁴ Only five days after the delegates received this news, Richard Henry Lee proposed a resolution declaring the united colonies free and independent states.¹²⁵ The king’s words were fresh on the delegate’s minds as they

¹¹⁹ Richard Henry Lee to Landon Carter, 2 June 1776 in Smith, *LDC*, 4:118. “His answer is that he is sorry for the rebellion, but that force on his part & sub[mission] on ours is all he proposes. This is the substance of his Tyrannic answer to the most sensible & humane Address that Modern times has produced.”

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Josiah Bartlett to John Langdon, 3 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:126. See also Joseph Hewes to Samuel Johnston, 4 June 1776. “Nothing but a total unconditioned submission with satisfie the Tyrant.”

¹²² Robert R. Livingston to John Jay, 5 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:141. For more evidence of the unifying effect of the king’s answer to the second London petition see Caesar Rodney to Thomas Rodney in *ibid.*, 4:149 as well as Elbridge Gerry to James Warren, 6 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:152-153.

¹²³ Robert Morris to Silas Deane, 5 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:146. Robert Morris was a Pennsylvania statesmen who served in the Continental Congress from 1775 to 1778. He is known as the financier of the American Revolution because he effectively controlled the financial operations of the War for American Independence.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:146-147. See also Joseph Bartlett to Nathaniel Folsom, 6 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:151. “The affair of Declaring these Colonies Independent States and absolved from all allegiance to the Crown of Britain must soon be Decided.”

¹²⁵ Richard Henry Lee’s Draft Resolution on Independence, 7 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:157. For more evidence of the unifying effect of the king’s answer to the second London petition see Caesar Rodney to Thomas Rodney in *ibid.*, 4:149 as well as Elbridge Gerry to James Warren, 6 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:152-153.

proceeded to debate independence throughout the month of June.¹²⁶ George III had made his intentions known and his words had a profound effect on the Continental Congress. By the beginning of July, the majority of the delegates from each colony concluded that independence was the only sure way to guarantee American liberty. The gradual erosion of royal authority had met its end in July 1776.

Since 1763, the American colonists had actively protested the authority of Parliament. They insisted on their independence from that body under British constitutional law, because they had no representation in it. Yet, Americans continually remembered their allegiance to the king. Through him, the American colonies remained firmly tied to the British Empire. The crown established their charters and provided their protection. Beginning in August 1775, though, the delegates of the Continental Congress, as elite politicians representing all of America, began to question royal authority. It is remarkable how quickly their political ties unraveled. Less than a year later, their questions would result in a complete, irrevocable break from the British government. The British Empire and, indeed, the history of humanity would never be the same.

In the opinion of the delegates of the First and Second Continental Congress, Great Britain was to blame for the break. Robert Morris expressed this sentiment best:

Great Britain may thank herself for this Event, for whatever might have been the original designs of some Men in promoting the present Contest I am sure that America in general never set out with any View or desire of establishing an Independent Empire. They have been drove into it step by step with a reluctance on their part that has been manifested in all their proceedings¹²⁷

Seeking to throw off the bonds of Parliament, Americans suddenly found themselves absolved from any political connection not only from Parliament but from the king to whom they had for

¹²⁶ John Adams, Lee, Wythe and others arguing for Independence pointed out that it was clear from the king's answer to the second London petition that "Britain was determined to accept nothing less than a *carte blanche*." Thomas Jefferson's Notes of Proceedings in Congress, 7-28 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:162.

¹²⁷ Robert Morris to Silas Deane, 5 June 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:147.

so long been bound by allegiance and affection. From July 1775 to March 1776, George III issued a series of speeches and proclamations that left the delegates with no other choice but independence if they meant to secure American liberties. By his words and his deeds, King George III undermined American affection for Great Britain and their allegiance to the crown. Was independence an accident? Could reconciliation have been achieved? The delegates' answer to these questions seems evident. In their opinion, reconciliation was impossible unless the king had chosen to deal with the American colonies with a more diplomatic and conciliatory attitude in this crucial moment in American history.

As politicians and diplomats, the members of the Continental Congress based their decisions on the words of George III and the actions British government. They constructed a vision of the intentions of the British government based on the information they received from Great Britain and reacted in the context of their responsibility as political leaders. When most delegates determined that the king was unwaveringly dedicated to reduce Americans to slavery, independence came as a natural consequence. Other Americans though, making decisions from different information and in unique contexts, rejected royal authority at different times and for different reasons. This truth is essential to understanding the political experience of another influential group of Americans, southern planters.

Chapter 2:

Master and Slave, King and Subject: Southern Planters and the Fall of King George III

Southern planters in pre-revolutionary America experienced an illustration of monarchy always before them. Hierarchy, with its complex system of obligation and protocol, was a given, a daily part of their lives. More than a New England merchant, or a middling western farmer, or any other American, they knew what it meant to hold the authority of a monarch. Thus, when Congress began to protest the power of Parliament and eventually reject royal authority as well, planters held a unique view. Like any other person in a time of upheaval, they interpreted extraordinary change based on their everyday assumptions, but because their experience was unique, their reaction was unique as well. Examining how planters understood the complex relationship between master and slave on their little plantation kingdoms might help to explain their view of the relationship between king and subject in the greater British Empire. Ultimately for southern planters, embracing independence was not so much a rejection of monarchy as a form of government as it was a personal rejection of King George III as their sovereign. He himself failed to fulfill the obligations of a king to his subjects, obligations they had come to expect through their experience of serving as a master to their slaves.

Many historians agree that planters saw themselves as monarchs and viewed their plantation as a little kingdom within the larger framework of the British Empire. Robert Olwell argued this point. Seeking to understand the relationship between “Kings & Slaves,” in the South Carolina low country, Olwell argued that each planter was a little king and “each

plantation . . . a little kingdom within *the* kingdom.”¹ This extended not only to the relationship between the slave and master of the plantation but also that of children and wives to the patriarchal father and husband.² Rhys Isaac’s argued in, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* as much by showing the Revolution’s effect on Landon Carter’s plantation. Ultimately, every relationship on a southern plantation found its basis in a mutually understood hierarchical structure. The prevalence of order on Carter’s plantation, Isaac argued, depended on how all the players in Carter’s little kingdom understood and respected this structure.³

That planters saw themselves as small kings pervades their diaries and letters. Henry Laurens, a leading planter in South Carolina, believed his slaves viewed him as “their Father, their Guardian, & Protector,” some of the same language that British subjects traditionally used in reference to their king.⁴ He referred to the manner “by which I govern my Plantation Negroes” as “Laws” and compared them to the laws of parliament and the actions of the British ministry.⁵ Landon Carter, took notice of the death of a pet “canary bird” believing that even the smallest creature “under my care and protection deserves a Small remembrance.”⁶ Carter probably remembered the colleagues of his wealthy father calling him by his nickname, which was none

¹ Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 3, 186. Chapter 5, “Little Kingdoms: The Political Economy of the Plantations” is especially relevant.

² *Ibid.*, 192.

³ Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). The notion that planters considered themselves kings over their plantations undergirded Isaac’s argument, but he discussed this idea explicitly on pages xi, 46, 96-97, 181. His main argument was that the social upheaval and eventual rejection of monarchy and hierarchy that characterized the American Revolution tested and strained the basis of order on Landon Carter’s plantation.

⁴ Henry Laurens to Lachlan McIntosh, Westminster, 13 March 1773 in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. Philip M. Hamer et al. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 8:619 (hereafter *PHL*).

⁵ Laurens to Johann Rodolph Von Valltravers, Charles Town, 22 May 1775 in *ibid.*, 10:133.

⁶ Landon Carter, 15 April 1758 in *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1965), 1:216 (hereafter *DLC*).

other than “King.”⁷ Furthermore, many planters referred to their slaves possessively but affectionately as “my people,”⁸ and they were often eager to play the part of an impartial judge in disputes between slaves, overseers, or family members. The language of monarchy saturated plantation life and was made manifest in the attitudes and actions of masters and slaves alike.

Although the parallels between monarchy and the culture of power in plantation life is apparent in planters’ writings and has been well-established in studies of the colonial South, few historians have applied this understanding to the political controversy of the revolutionary era.⁹ Instead, historians’ have sought to understand the dynamics of power and culture within a plantation in its own right, or, as in the case of Isaac, how changing political and social values affected the plantation’s political structure. But such analysis holds a great deal of explanatory power for why planters thought and behaved the way they did in the larger political landscape of the British Empire. In order to gain a better understanding of why many southern planters rejected the authority of King George III, it is important first to examine the responsibilities of patriarchs in the political structure of some typical, large southern plantations.

The relationship between slaves and masters in America was not typically one of

⁷ Edmund Berkely, Jr., “A Brief Life of Robert Carter,” in *The Diary, Correspondence, and Papers of Robert “King” Carter of Virginia, 1701-1732*, ed. Edmund Berkely Jr., <http://carter.lib.virginia.edu/> (accessed 3 November 2012).

⁸ This type of language is prevalent in the writings of many southern planters. For examples see William Byrd, 13 January 1711, 15 January 1711, 22 January 1711 in *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*, eds. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1941), 286, 287, 290; George Washington to William Pearce, Philadelphia, 20 April 1794 in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John Clement Fitzpatrick, et al. (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), 33:336 (hereafter *WGW*); and Carter, 27 July 1774 and 13 February 1777 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:837, 2:1075.

⁹ Historians have studied the motivations behind planters’ political decisions in the American Revolution, but such studies tend to focus on how economic factors may have influenced planters’ turn toward independence. The best example is T. H. Breen’s *Tobacco Culture*. Breen argued that planters came into conflict with British merchants as they realized their massive debt amounted to an uncomfortable dependence on their financial partners. After 1772, this phenomenon “merge[d] into a single powerful expression of discontent” not only against British merchants, but against the government of Great Britain as well (xxvi). Thus, they realized that they “had to break with the economic and political system” of the British Empire in order to “achieve personal independence” (xxvii). T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), xxvi-xxvii. See also Merrill Jensen, “The American Revolution and American Agriculture,” *Agricultural History* 43, no. 1 (1969): 107-124.

complete domination on the part of the master. In recent decades, historians have begun to appreciate how slaves negotiated their position and managed to gain varying degrees of power on the plantation. Slaves did not passively accept their position as chattel but expected masters to treat them with at least some level of dignity. Henry Laurens described his relationship with his slaves as one of “reciprocal obligation.”¹⁰ Southern planters perceived that they had a responsibility to provide for their slaves materially, uphold their dignity, and to protect them from mistreatment. In return, masters expected their slaves’ loyalty, respect, and, of course, their labor. The result was a complex relationship with understood obligations on both sides.

Landon Carter offered one of the best expressions of this reciprocal relationship in his diary when he reflected on his interaction with eight runaway slaves. In November 1775 Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, declared martial law in the colony and shocked most of the country by a bold proclamation concerning Virginia’s slaves. He offered freedom to any slave who escaped his master to fight for the British army. Planters were appalled at his actions. George Washington broke from his usually moderate language to urge Virginians to “instantly crush” the “arch-traitor to the rights of humanity,”¹¹ arguing that Virginia would not know peace while the tyrant was alive.¹² The chaos that followed Dunmore’s proclamation affected Carter personally as he learned in the summer of 1776 that eight of his slaves had run away to Dunmore.¹³ Carter immediately sent messengers into the colony looking for his slaves and for months anxiously awaited any news from them expressing in his diary both contempt and

¹⁰ Laurens to Lachlan McIntosh, Westminster, 13 March 1773 in Hamer, *PHL*, 8:619.

¹¹ Washington to Joseph Reed, Cambridge, 15 December 1775 in Fitzpatrick, *GW*, 4:167.

¹² Washington to Richard Henry Lee, Cambridge, 26 December 1775 in *ibid.*, 4:186. Carter also expressed his personal contempt for Dunmore and even expressed hope for his death. Carter, 15 July 1776 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:1058.

¹³ Carter, 3 July 1776 in *ibid.*, 2:1053.

concern for his wayward subjects.¹⁴ He certainly was angry with Dunmore, but the full weight of his bitterness fell instead on his runaway slaves and one slave in particular named Moses.¹⁵

Carter heard a rumor a couple weeks after their escape that Dunmore had betrayed the runaway slaves. Instead of offering them freedom, he allegedly sent a shipload of runaways to be sold to the West Indies, an environment much more dangerous and grueling than a typical Virginia plantation. Carter reacted by expressing his bitterness for Moses. It would serve him right to be sold back into slavery, Carter wrote, and “glut his genius for liberty which he was not born to.”¹⁶

Why did Carter express such bitterness and surprise that some of his slaves would accept Dunmore’s offer? Surely any slave would jump at the chance for liberty just as many self-respecting Americans would take up arms to defend their own freedom. So why did Carter take their departure so personally? The answer is two-fold. First, Carter believed Moses and his companions did not deserve freedom because, as he wrote, “he was not born to [it].”¹⁷ The basis of chattel slavery in America was racial. Carter believed Moses should remain a slave, because, as a black man, he was born a slave.¹⁸ But there was also another reason his actions hurt Carter so deeply. He believed he had faithfully upheld his duty as a master to provide materially for these eight slaves, and, in return, he expected their loyalty. A year after these events, he “reflect[ed] on [his] own conduct to Moses and his gang of runaways” and concluded that he had

¹⁴ For examples see Carter, 3 July 1776, 5 July 1776, 13 July 1776, 15 July 1776, 13 February 1777 in *ibid.*, 2:1054, 2:1056, 2:1057, 2:1075.

¹⁵ Carter, 15 July 1776 in *ibid.*, 2:1058.

¹⁶ Carter, 13 July 1776 in *ibid.*, 2:1056. “John Selden met Purcell coming up and bid tell me that Dunmore last week sent off a load of negroes to one of the Islands which so alarmed the rest that the county of Gloster was disturbed with their howlings. Possibly Capt. Moses, the freeman, may be one of them to glut his genius for liberty which he was not born to.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ It is possible that Carter based his view on Moses’s right to freedom solely on his birth rather than his race. For a speculative but enlightening discussion of this topic see F. Nwabueze Okoye, “Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1980): 3-28.

done nothing to prompt their treachery.¹⁹ He wrote specifically about each of the eight individuals who had escaped and described how he had been faithful to provide for them either physically or emotionally. He had cared for four at great expense when they were sick or injured.²⁰ For one named Manuel, he “really obliged by bringing Suky, his wife” providing for him not only materially, but emotionally as well.²¹ He had also protected Manuel and another slave when they were in trouble with the law. For each of the eight runaways, Carter satisfied his conscience that they were in the wrong, because he had been careful to provide for them and uphold the fatherly role of a master.²²

Planters believed they had an obligation to provide for their slaves not only to protect an investment but to fulfill their end of a reciprocal relationship. Yet this was not the only responsibility vital to the role of a plantation patriarch. Slaves also expected the master to protect them from mistreatment. In large plantation systems, the master did not drive the slaves himself. Instead, planters employed several men to motivate and direct slaves tending to crops and making clothes, furniture, or other manufactured goods. These overseers, as they were called, present a third party to the master-slave relationship. Their authority derived directly from the master, and it was thus the master’s responsibility to define the role of overseers and to ensure a just and proper balance between severity and leniency in how each treated the slaves under his supervision. Most planters believed it was their duty as a kingly protector to shield his slaves from the cruelty of arbitrary power. Laurens explained his view best in a letter of August 1766.

¹⁹ Carter, 10 July 1777 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:1109.

²⁰ One of these runaways, who Carter called the “Mulatto Peter,” frequently experienced serious nosebleeds. In January 1770, Carter described in detail all the methods he had used in the past to cure him and had had some success, but in this case, he called for a doctor to see him. He wrote that he did not care for doctors and was reluctant to call for one, but he recognized “it is the duty of a Master and I have sent for them to satisfy that.” This anecdote shows how Carter cared for the wellbeing of his slaves to fulfill his obligations as a master. Carter, 24 January 1770 in *ibid.*, 1:348-349.

²¹ Carter, 10 July 1777 in *ibid.*, 2:1109.

²² For more information on these men and their relationship with Carter as described in his diary, see Isaac, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom*, 17-36.

A merchant friend of his suggested that planters expand their business to the western part of the colony and begin new plantations in that sparsely populated region. Laurens rejected the idea because there would be no way to supervise such a remote plantation and slaves “might be exposed to the arbitrary power of an Overseer.”²³ In order for the three-way relationship between masters, overseers, and slaves to operate properly, the master had to maintain vigilance and form a system of communication between planters and slaves.²⁴

An overseer’s daily life was a constant struggle to live up to his employer’s expectations. The writings of southern planters are full of rebukes and admonishments from planters to their overseers. Slave-owners controlled not only how overseers conducted their business with slaves but almost every other aspect of their lives as well. Planters’ letters and diary entries concerning their overseers indicate that, though paid well, overseers enjoyed, in some ways, even less freedom than the slaves they supervised. Carter hired John King to overlook two parts of his plantation in September 1757. The terms of employment included a promise that he “follow all my Directions in every thing” and that he refrain from “go[ing] abroad without my leave and to use every kind of Diligence.”²⁵ Another example is Washington, who repeatedly insisted that his overseers remain “*always* with [their] people” and that they refrain from taking visitors into their home, which might distract them from their duties.²⁶ The job of an overseer not only required constant attention but also a great sacrifice in their personal lives. Masters often scolded their employees for failing to bring in an adequate crop or for behaving unprofessionally, but these

²³ Laurens to Richard Oswald, 12 August 1766 in Hamer, *PHL*, 5:156.

²⁴ For more on the relationship between slaves, overseers, and masters see Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 211-218.

²⁵ Carter, 12 September 1757 in Greene, *DLC*, 1:176.

²⁶ Washington to Burges Ball, Philadelphia, 27 July 1794 in Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 33:444. Washington wrote to a fellow planter, Burges Ball, to give his opinion of one of his former overseers, Hyland Crow, who Ball considered hiring. He said that Crow’s many visitors caused him to neglect his slaves, who would then become lazy. In order to motivate them later, Crow had to use the whip far more often than he would have if he had been more diligent. So ultimately, the purpose of Washington’s policy on this matter was to protect his slaves from mistreatment. See also Washington to William Pearce, Philadelphia, 18 December 1793 in *ibid.*, 33:192.

rebukes also contained warnings and instructions on how to treat slaves. Henry Laurens, for example, warned one of his overseers to “remember on your part not to make ill use of your power.”²⁷ Overseers were expected to behave judiciously with their slaves, and their employers had means of assuring that they did.

Planters generally took pride in ensuring communication between slaves and masters concerning the conduct of the overseer. Masters often allowed their slaves to come to them with complaints of mistreatment and considered it their duty to investigate their concerns. Evidence that slaves were able to bring complaints of mistreatment to their masters is abundant in several planters’ diaries and letters. Washington’s opinion of his overseers often depended on how many complaints he heard from the slaves under their care. He was not pleased with one of his overseers, Hyland Crow, because he “had too frequent complaints of ill treatment.”²⁸ On the other hand, another overseer by the name of William Stuart he described as a sober honest man who, though he was talkative and at times arrogant, was an excellent overseer because he lived “in peace and harmony with the Negroes who are confided to his care,” none of which had ever made a complaint against him.²⁹ Laurens wrote that some of his slaves had come to him to tell him that one of his overseers, Abraham Shad, was too hard on them. In this case, Laurens did not take his slave’s side, but he was careful to investigate the matter and caution Schad to live in

²⁷ Laurens to Frederick Wiggins, Charles Town, 20 March 1766 in Hamer, *PHL*, 5:92. Normally, such discussions occurred in person rather than in writing as it was customary for the patriarch to ride out daily to observe his slaves and overseers at work. Nevertheless, planters’ diaries and letters contain enough discussion of their slaves and overseers to offer a description of the dynamics of this complex relationship.

²⁸ Washington to Burges Ball, Philadelphia, 27 July 1794 in Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 33:444. Washington also described the dissatisfaction of his slaves under Crow’s supervision in Washington to William Pearce, Philadelphia, 18 December 1793 in *ibid.*, 33:192-193. He wrote that his mistreatment of the slaves under his care had “in one or two instances been productive of serious consequences” possibly insinuating that slaves may have reacted violently to his actions or that his flogging had caused injury.

²⁹ Washington to William Pearce, Philadelphia, 18 December 1793 in *ibid.*, 33:193. Washington hired William Pearce to act as his representative at Mount Vernon during his absence as he served as President. Thus, the letters written to Pearce and other stewards during Washington’s term in office are valuable to explain the responsibilities and role of a master on his plantation. This letter in particular helps to assess Washington’s relationship with his overseers. He explained his opinion of each of the overseers employed at Mount Vernon and gave advice on how Pearce could motivate and direct each of them.

peace with his slaves.³⁰ Laurens and other planters were often eager “to play the part of the patriarchal judge,” investigating complaints thoroughly and exacting punishment on the deserving party.³¹

Though planters’ letters and diaries reveal that there was a channel of communication between masters and slaves, they do not usually describe in detail how slaves would make their complaints heard. Philip Vickers Fithian, while serving as a tutor in Landon Carter’s plantation home, however, described a powerful scene of a slave asking his master to intervene in a conflict. “An old Negro Man,” Fithian recounted in his journal, complained to Carter that his overseer had been withholding food from him.³² The elderly slave appeared before Carter directly in his home in order to make his complaint known. But, possibly because it was a fairly common occurrence, it was not this act alone that made a lasting impression on Fithian. Rather, “the humble posture” he took before his master evoked strong emotions in the observer. “We were sitting in the passage,” he continued, when the old man “sat himself down on the Floor clasp’d his Hands together, with his face directly to Mr *Carter*, & then began his Narration.”³³ Not only does Fithian’s description show an example of how slaves brought complaints to their masters, but it also exposes an important aspect of their relationship. The old man’s behavior reveals that, at least in this case, slaves operated in the hierarchical structure of the plantation system. The image of the slave posturing himself humbly before his master as he petitioned for justice struck Fithian powerfully, because it reinforced the master and slave’s respective roles as

³⁰ Laurens to Abraham Schad, Charles Town, 23 August 1765 in Hamer, *PHL*, 4:666.

³¹ Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 215. Olwell argued that Planters were often eager to take the side of their slaves because it allowed them to cultivate an image of impartiality and benevolence.

³² Philip Vickers Fithian, 3 July 1774 in *Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1943), 169-170. Besides supervising slaves in their work, overseers also had the task of distributing food and supplies to slaves. This arrangement placed a great deal of power in the hands of overseers and sometimes tended to cause disputes.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170.

king and subject on this plantation kingdom.³⁴

Carter's diary offers another example of how slaves made an appeal to their master. This account has added value, because Carter described in detail how he responded to a slave's complaint. Fithian's account showed that slaves had the opportunity to come before Carter to make their grievances known. Carter did not deny that right to any slave on his plantation, even if that slave was no more than a child. In June 1773, just before bedtime, a little girl "came up and shewed a bloody ear which she said John Selfe's [one of the overseers'] wife with whom she lived had Stuck pins in."³⁵ Carter promised that he would investigate the girl's complaints thoroughly, fancying himself an impartial judge as he wrote that he would "suspend [his] conclusion until [he] could hear farther about it."³⁶

The next morning, he discussed the conflict with the girl again. The interview must have been an incongruous scene – the powerful, aged patriarch before a small, timid black girl in eighteenth-century Virginia – but it was Carter's responsibility to see to the girl's protection. "She stood still for some time," Carter wrote, "and at last" confessed to her crime.³⁷ She had lied; Selfe's wife had not mistreated her. Selfe himself had whipped her in punishment for aiding two slaves who had stolen corn from his warehouse. The girl's grandmother, an old woman named Sukey, she confessed, had convinced her to tell Carter that Selfe's wife had mistreated her in

³⁴ This is not to say that all slaves passively accepted the dominance of their master. There are plenty of accounts available to make the case that slaves exercised everything in their power to negotiate for varying levels of freedom in the plantation system. When slaves believed they had been mistreated or that they had not received justice, they did not always shy away from exacting revenge on their master. This is clear from Carter's description of the actions of one of his slaves, Granny Sukey, which will be discussed in the following pages. Nevertheless, Fithian's account of the old man's appeal to Carter, as an isolated case, reveals that planters' position as a plantation monarch was not their sole invention, but found support in the actions of others.

³⁵ Carter, 22 June 1773 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:760.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

order to trick Carter into removing the girl from the Selfe's residence.³⁸

An uncaring judge might have let the matter go, but Carter was still concerned for the girl's safety. What of the bloody ear? Had Selfe seen fit to punish this girl so severely that he would whip her on the face? He spoke with Selfe who confessed to damaging the girl's ear by mistake during her punishment. Finally satisfied, Carter laid the matter to rest. Though he gave Selfe no rebuke for this carelessness, he did not punish the girl for her lie either. He had considered all sides of the situation and concluded that he had done his duty to protect his slaves from mistreatment.³⁹

Enter the girl's grandmother, the scheming "Granny Sukey," who had encouraged her granddaughter to lie about the bloody ear. Carter's next entry revealed Sukey's motivation for the lie and her anger when her scheme had not worked. "Sukey, the old Granny before spoken of," Carter wrote, "to be revenged because I would not take her granddaughter away turned out all my Cattle last night on my Cowpen ground which have done me a very prodigious mischief."⁴⁰ Comical as this scene is, it contains a revealing truth about the master-slave relationship. When Granny Sukey concluded that Carter had not done enough to protect her granddaughter, she engaged in what she saw as righteous rebellion. Apparently, she believed her granddaughter had grown "poor and starved" under the Selfe family's care. Carter was of course

³⁸ Ibid. It was apparently not unusual for small children who were not yet old enough to work in the fields to live with overseers and attend to their household needs. Washington insisted that his overseers never "retain any of my Negroes who are able and fit to work in the Crop, in or about your own house, for your own purposes." He did, however, allow "a small boy or girl for the purpose of fetching wood or water, tending a child, or such like things," to serve the overseer's household so long they were put to work on the plantation "so soon as they are able." Washington to the Overseers at Mount Vernon, Philadelphia, 14 July 1793 in Fitzpatrick, *GW*, 33:11.

³⁹ Carter, 22 June 1773 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:760. Carter's family disagreed with his judgment. They believed he should have punished Selfe more severely for cruelty. The conflict turned into "a most agreeable Peal" in Carter's home which brought up other accusations against Selfe's character. This is important to note because even though Carter had done much to protect the slave girl, his family believed he should have gone further. Carter may have believed he had fulfilled his duty, but his family did not. The duty to protect slaves from mistreatment extended beyond the role of the patriarch to the patriarch's family as well.

⁴⁰ Carter, 23 June 1773 in *ibid.*, 2:762.

furious for the slave's misconduct and promised to "repay this treatment."⁴¹

This story is significant for three reasons. First, the fact that a slave, a small child no less, could come directly to Carter's home and declare a grievance speaks volumes. Carter and his family were certainly accessible when slaves had a complaint. Second, Carter cared enough to investigate the child's concerns and possibly postpone punishing two thieves in their midst.⁴² Furthermore, he took great pride in his efforts as he thought he had done well to fulfill his patriarchal duty. Third, Granny Sukey's rebellious act reveals that both planters and slaves believed masters had a duty to protect them from mistreatment. Carter did not imagine this duty; rather, it existed as part of an unspoken agreement in the master-slave relationship. Though Carter was convinced he had fulfilled his duty in protecting the girl, Granny Sukey was not satisfied. Because Carter had not fulfilled her expectations to care and protect her granddaughter, she felt justified in expressing her anger by setting free Carter's herd of cattle.

Planters' diaries and letters suggest that the presence of slavery in their daily lives informed the language of their political protest of Great Britain. Historians have documented how Americans compared their situation under British oppression to the experience of the African slaves in their midst.⁴³ This is no less true of southern planters, whose political writings are full of references to slavery. Laurens wrote soon after the outbreak of hostilities in Massachusetts that every American should be ready to take up arms against a government that

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Carter learned of the burglary on the same night that the girl came to see him. Nevertheless, he gave first priority to investigating the possible mistreatment of the child. The fact that Carter devoted much more space in his diary to relating the story concerning the girl than dealing with the punishment of the girl's accomplices speaks to Carter's primary duty to protect rather than punish. The only note he made concerning the thieves, Daniel and Jubas Harry, was a couple of sentences at the end of this long entry saying they had run away. He makes no note of searching for them or returning them for punishment. Ibid.

⁴³ See Okoye, "Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries" for a detailed account of this kind of language in political pamphlets of the Revolutionary era.

had pursued in America “a State of Subjection little better than Slavery.”⁴⁴ Carter counted the cost of Great Britain’s oppressive policies after he learned that three more of his slaves had run away to the British in February 1777. Ironically, he insisted that if Great Britain did not stop stealing his “property” in this way, he would be reduced to slavery and beggary.⁴⁵

That planters used the language of bondage to describe their political fears suggests that the institution of slavery, along with its complex system of mutual obligation, was a vital part of their interpretive framework in civil matters. In light of this, it is plausible that planters allowed their relationship with slavery to inform their relationship with King George III. Just as planters knew they had a duty to provide for and protect their slaves, they believed the king of Great Britain had a duty to protect them from arbitrary power. They believed George III had betrayed them because he failed to fulfill his side of a reciprocal relationship.⁴⁶

Some planters of the revolutionary era continued to uphold the principles of monarchy and hierarchy despite the political upheaval that surrounded them. After all, they had an interest in hierarchy, because it provided the basis for order on their plantation and justification for their patriarchal authority. Washington, Carter, and Laurens were all planters who, in their own time

⁴⁴ Laurens to William Manning, Charles Town, 22 May 1775 in Hamer, *PHL*, 10:127.

⁴⁵ Carter, 13 February 1777 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:1075.

⁴⁶ Planters certainly did not want to be treated as slaves. The language of their political protest makes it clear that they did not think of themselves as slaves nor did they see George III as their slave master. No planter would suggest that the king had the power to exert as much control over them as they did over their slaves. Nevertheless, they did think of themselves as inferior subjects to the British monarch and projected the nature of their relationship with their inferiors on their political connection with George III.

Although this study focuses mainly on patriot planters, there were many loyalist planters in the South. Henry Sharp of Georgia remained loyal to the crown and even died from a wound he received in battle while fighting for the British in Georgia. John Rippon, ed., *The Baptist Annual Register for 1790, 1791, 1792, and Part of 1793* (London, 1797), 333-334. See also Allen D. Candler, ed., *The Revolutionary Records of the State of Georgia* (Atlanta, GA: The Franklin-Turner Company, 1908), 1:619-620. Another well-known loyalist planter was James Habersham of Georgia. Although he died August 1775, he did actively oppose the Georgia Sons of Liberty after the passage of the Coercive Acts in 1774 and did not support the War. Frank Lambert, *James Habersham: Loyalty, Politics, and Commerce in Colonial Georgia* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 155-178, especially 172-173.

and in their own way, eventually embraced independence.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, at the time of independence they did not show an aversion to monarchy as many other revolutionaries had.

The planters' reaction to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* is revealing, because they agreed with many of its arguments but rejected its attack on monarchy as inherently unjust. Washington, the first of the three to support independence, recognized that his "countrymen" would find it difficult to accept Paine's arguments because of their "steady attachment heretofore to royalty."⁴⁸ Washington was more supportive of the pamphlet than either Laurens or Carter, but he recognized that his countrymen would have trouble accepting Paine's arguments, especially his sweeping criticism of monarchy as a form of government.

Laurens was more tenacious in his criticism of *Common Sense*. He spoke publically against Paine's arguments and "more against those indecent expressions" concerning monarchy. He recognized that its arguments were compelling and might "make many converts to Republican principles," but Laurens and his countrymen in the South would only accept it if "the present scene of Kingly persecution is much longer continued."⁴⁹ He ardently hoped and prayed that God would "interpose, to Soften the Hearts of the King & his Counselors" to avoid a break with the country he loved so dearly.⁵⁰ The thought of independence, Laurens wrote to a friend in

⁴⁷ Of course, Washington, Carter, and Laurens do not represent all Southern planters of the revolutionary era. Nevertheless, they are excellent examples of that elite group and useful for this study for three reasons. First, their writings are readily available and cover a variety of topics. Second, all of these planters were influential in their communities and throughout the colonies as holders of substantial plantations in Virginia and South Carolina. Third, Carter, Washington, and Laurens were all engaged in political matters. Washington was a member of the Continental Congress and Commander-in-Chief of America's armed forces during the war. Both Carter and Laurens were active in the political affairs of their colonies. Laurens's political career would extend to the Continental Congress as he served as the President of that assembly from 1777-1780. Because these planters were also active politicians, they kept well informed of the politics of the imperial crisis. Their knowledge as politicians combined with their experience as plantation patriarchs produced an informed but tendentious response.

⁴⁸ Washington to Joseph Reed, Cambridge, 1 April 1776 in Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 4:455.

⁴⁹ Laurens to John Laurens, Charles Town, 22 February 1776 in Hamer, *PHL*, 11:115.

⁵⁰ Laurens to Robert Deans, Charles Town, 8 January 1776 in *ibid.*, 11:11.

England, “has caused tears to trickle down my cheeks.” Still, he recognized its inevitability.⁵¹ When he heard that the Continental Congress had declared independence, he did not join in the rejoicing of many of the citizens of Charles Town. Instead, the news inspired “a Tear of affection for the good old Country & for the people in it whom I dearly Love.”⁵² Regarding the king, he felt like a “dutiful Son, thrust by the hand of violence out of a Father’s House into the wide World.” He did not blame the king for the separation, but continued to find fault in the advice of his ministers. He even felt pity for George III, who he believed had “been greatly deceived and abused.”⁵³

For Carter, *Common Sense* inspired anger rather than sadness. He railed against the pamphlet in his usual aggressive tone, giving his “opinion freely as to the *nonsense* instead of *Common Sense* advanced.”⁵⁴ He believed that America should not declare independence unless absolutely forced to do so, because “as a constitution of government none was so good as the British.”⁵⁵ Carter believed in monarchy, especially Britain’s constitutional monarchy so strongly, in fact, that if America was forced to make the lamentable break with Great Britain, he believed she should establish a new government on the British model. He continued, “though we need not be under the control of [the British constitution’s] now depraved arbitrariness . . . it would be best for us to embrace the same mixed form.”⁵⁶ He argued that “in its Purity” the British constitution had no inherent tendency toward oppression and that “ministerial corruption” had caused the current crisis.⁵⁷

Carter despised Paine’s anti-monarchical arguments, because, he argued, patriots should

⁵¹ Laurens to William Manning, Charles Town, 27 February 1776 in *ibid.*, 11:128. “Britain will force a Separation [*sic*] & Independence will soon follow.”

⁵² Laurens to John Laurens, Charles Town, 14 August 1776 in *ibid.*, 11:228.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Carter, 14 June 1776 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:1050.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Carter, 23 May 1776 in *ibid.*, 2:1042.

not object to “a limited monarchy . . . on account of some possible arbitrariness that may be introduced into it.” Any form of government, whether it be monarchical or republican, was prone to fall into tyranny. As for “these Republican distractions” he insisted “I see no difference; an evil begot how it will and necessity is no better plea in a Republican form than it is or can be in a monarchical form.”⁵⁸ Carter was not against the English constitution. Rather, his aggression was stronger against Republicanism. The problem was more personal for Carter. He argued that George III and his ministry, rather than some flaw in the British constitution, were to blame for the trouble.⁵⁹

Just as slaves (at least in planters’ minds) perceived that overseers were the immediate cause of their oppression, so planters blamed their troubles not on the king himself but on the British ministry. The king’s ministers, like overseers, had a vital role in colonial politics. Because they received their power directly from the king, they provided a means for Americans to protest the actions of the British executive branch without questioning the ultimate authority of the king himself. In June 1775, Laurens expressed his concerns that corrupt ministers were deceiving the king. Writing to his son, Laurens insisted that he continued to revere the name of King George III and hoped that he and his successors would remain on the throne of both England and America. His evil ministers ought to be removed, though, because “his majesty has been misinformed: Ill advised by some of our fellow subjects, who are His Majesty’s Enemies & the Enemies of his faithful Americans against those I am willing & shall be willing to bear Arms & to repel force by force”⁶⁰ Laurens was neither a loyalist nor a pacifist. He was willing to

⁵⁸ Carter cited the behavior of many American patriots as evidence that Republican principles were no less likely to prevent tyranny than a limited monarchy. Many patriots were hypocrites, he argued, because they so often displayed a tendency toward tyranny as well. The chief example of patriots’ tyranny in Carter’s estimation was the destruction of loyalists’ property and the confiscation of their weapons. The patriots justified their actions on the pretense that it was a “pressing occasion,” which, Carter argued, “is the very first step in all despotic climax.” Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Laurens to John Laurens, Charles Town, 8 June 1775 in Hamer, *PHL*, 10:174.

fight for American freedoms. But in taking up arms against the king's troops, he did not believe he fought the king himself but "the machinations of a few Wicked Men who falsely call themselves his friends."⁶¹

Like Laurens, Carter also put the blame on the king's ministers. He expressed his suspicion of any proclamation that came in the king's name. He believed that George III's speeches and proclamations might not have been his own words, but only the writings of his ministers. Their manipulation, Carter argued, blocked communication between the king and his subjects, to the point that "the National Sun [was] no more Permitted to shine on his grateful people than Charles II was." How would Americans know whether royal proclamations were the king's words? Perhaps royal ministers had deceived the king and convinced him to sign his name to their slanderous statements.⁶² Though Carter became convinced of the corruption of the king himself much earlier than some other planters, he assumed that the oppression had started with the scheming of malevolent ministers rather than originating in the designs of the king himself. The plantation system would break down if slaves were not able to communicate with their masters. In a similar way, Carter feared that the king's ministers had blocked Americans' communication with the monarch, and the British Empire had fallen into distress as a result.

While these planters believed that the crisis had arisen from the king's crooked advisors, they eventually began to blame George III himself when he failed to protect them from the

⁶¹ Ibid. Planters may have drawn their resistance to the king from medieval political culture. Ernst H. Kantorowicz argued that Europeans held a mystical understanding of kingship. In their minds, the king had two bodies. One was a natural body in the king's living person and the other was an "immortal part of kingship," that is a body politic. Kantorowicz pointed out that this is the basis of the "Puritan cry of 'fighting the king to defend the King.'" This idea was prevalent in the English Civil War and allowed Parliament to oppose Charles I as an individual but confirm their loyalty to the political idea of monarchy. A similar notion may have informed planters and other Americans in their opposition to King George III. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 13, 23. For a brief discussion of this idea in the English Civil War see pages 20-23 and 40-42.

⁶² Carter, Undated Entry, 1775 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:962. Carter's emotional language speaks to his frustration: ". . .with what more certainly can we believe that A proclamation or command expressive of his own pleasure though attested by his own sign . . . has not been the fabricated assurance of some other servant?"

arbitrary power of his corrupt ministers. Planters expected the monarch to listen to the pleas of his subjects just as they investigated the complaints of their slaves, but the king continually refused to receive their petitions. Washington wrote in January 1776 that one of the king's recent speeches made it clear that he would persist in "disregarding the Petition from the United Voice of America, nothing less than the total Subversion of her Rights, will satisfie him."⁶³ Ever since he had heard that the king was planning to send a large force to subdue Americans, he had lost hope for reconciliation with Great Britain. The inevitable break would come, and it would be the king's fault for ignoring their petitions for so long. "I would tell them," he wrote:

that we had borne much, that we had long and ardently sought for reconciliation upon honorable terms, that it had been denied us, that all our attempts after peace had proved abortive, and had been grossly misrepresented, that we had done every thing which could be expected from the best of subjects, that the spirit of freedom beat too high in us to submit to slavery, and that if nothing else could satisfy a tyrant and his diabolical ministry, we are determined to shake off all connexions with a state so unjust and unnatural.⁶⁴

Washington believed by the beginning of 1776 that the time for petition had passed. King George III had ignored the concerns of his people for too long. Rather than fulfilling his duty to listen and investigate the complaints of his subjects, he had ignored them completely.

As early as May 1775, Laurens also began to suspect, that the king was "at the bottom of all this mischief."⁶⁵ Laurens continued to hope for reconciliation, but he began to blame the king rather than his ministers for their oppression. He believed the loyal American subjects of the British monarch had been "aggrieved" and they did not take up arms against their enemies out of "Licentious or Rebellious principles." Americans had demonstrated this through their careful

⁶³ Washington, Instructions to Major General Charles Lee, Head Quarters at Cambridge, 8 January 1776 in Fitzpatrick, *GW*, 4:422.

⁶⁴ Washington to Joseph Reed, Cambridge, 10 February 1776 in *ibid.*, 4:321.

⁶⁵ Laurens to William Manning, Charles Town, 22 May 1775 in Hamer, *PHL*, 10:129.

petitions, which the king had repeatedly ignored.⁶⁶ Indeed, Laurens used some of the same language as that of another southern planter, Thomas Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence. A major justification for dissolving royal authority in America and severing all connections with Great Britain was that “in every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”⁶⁷ George III’s refusal to respond to American petitions was one of the main grievances that led to independence.

Carter fought against independence throughout the first half of 1776, but this did not mean he approved of the king’s actions. For him King George III was no better than the tyrant king Charles I and ought to lose his authority. Carter dreamed of a reprise of the English Civil War, an internal revolution in England, rather than a war for independence in America. He would rejoice, he wrote, to hear that the people of England had removed “the tyrant hypocrite from his throne.”⁶⁸ Carter’s cynicism was born out of the king’s own words. He did not believe that “the King with so foul a mouth as that with what he opened in his last speech can ever desire or design to grant America her reasonable demands now.”⁶⁹ The king’s inattentiveness to the concerns of America had jaded this southern planter.

Not only did Carter compare George III to despots in England’s past, but he also aligned him with one of the most famous tyrants in history, Nero of ancient Rome. While reading the writings of Tacitus, he came across an anecdote that was “so similar to our own [circumstances]

⁶⁶ Ibid, 10:127.

⁶⁷ Continental Congress, The Declaration of Independence.

⁶⁸ Carter, 2 May 1776 in Greene, *DLC*, 2:1032.

⁶⁹ Ibid. The king’s words had convinced him that he had no intention of reconciliation. In May 1776, Carter heard a rumor that twenty-seven peace commissioners had asked permission to come ashore to speak with Congress. They carried with them £4,000 each amounting to £108,000 as a bribe of sorts and thousands of soldiers to coerce Congress into peace if necessary. “But I can’t believe one word of the report,” Carter wrote, “or at best it is only some ministerial scheme to deceive America.” Carter, 23 May 1776 in *ibid.*, 2:1043.

in the Present contest” that he had to record his thoughts about it. During the time of Nero, the “Ancient Britons” were in rebellion, so the emperor sent his general, Polyclatus, to the British island to bring peace. When Polyclatus arrived, “those hardy ancestors of ours” laughed at him, asking how such a powerful man with an experienced army “could be so subservient to the Slavish commands of the Despot who sent them!”⁷⁰

Carter described many connections between the story and the American Revolution. He believed that George III, as the tyrannical Nero, had sent over his own Polyclatus, General Howe, who also found that subduing the American people would not be any easier than quelling the rebellion of their ancient ancestors. Carter hoped that Americans would show the same contempt for this modern Nero’s general and “forever hug that independency . . . that has thus providentially brought about a Seperation [*sic*] from such a Tyrant, and his adherents.”⁷¹ By early 1777, Carter had embraced independence and celebrated the break from the tyrant king George III. Like the mythical Nero, who ignored the suffering of his citizens and played his fiddle as Rome burned, so George III had disregarded his subjects for too long and thereby lost their affection and loyalty forever. Carter imagined that George III “like . . . Nero on his death bed . . . will have it to lament, that he had neither friend nor foe to shorten his career, before he got to his length of Despotism. It is indeed a pity.”⁷²

These examples suggest that a major reason why some southern planters rejected the authority of King George III was his failure to fulfill his duty to address their petitions. On some level, planters based their understanding of the king’s responsibilities on their relationship with the slaves on their plantation. The British ministry, who like plantation overseers, derived their authority from a benevolent ruler had become oppressive and began to exert arbitrary power over

⁷⁰ Carter, 25 February 1777 in *ibid.*, 2:1086.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2:1087.

the American people. Southern planters rebelled because they believed their sovereign had not adequately fulfilled his obligation in a reciprocal relationship, a reciprocity they sought to honor every day as they governed their plantation societies.

The master-slave relationship was not entirely one-sided. Though the nature of chattel slavery made this exchange inherently unequal, there was a level of reciprocity in the relationship. Slaves expected their master to provide for their material needs and to protect them from arbitrary power, and masters accepted and even relished in fulfilling these expectations. It stands to reason, then, that given the hierarchical worldview southern planters held, they would expect the same service from their king, especially when it came to protection from arbitrary power. Though planters did not think of themselves as slaves, they did submit themselves to the authority of the king just as slaves submitted themselves to the authority of the master provided he fulfilled his obligations according to their standards. The writings of some planters concerning the revolutionary crisis reveal that, although some defended the merits of monarchy and hierarchy, they believed that King George III had betrayed the American people in failing to protect them from the arbitrary power of Parliament and the British ministry. Southern planters found themselves in the same predicament as Granny Sukey of Landon Carter's plantation. When she believed her master had not adequately protected his slaves from mistreatment, she rebelled by letting loose Carter's herd of cattle. With the same righteous anger, southern planters, because their master-king had failed to protect them from the cruelty of arbitrary power, also rebelled and let loose the bonds of loyalty that had once bound America to the British monarch.

Chapter 3:

“No Trace of Papal Bondage:”
American Patriot Ministers and the Fall of King George III

Just as southern planters understood the political turmoil around them through the lens of their common experience, American patriot ministers used the interpretive framework of their religion to protest ministerial and ultimately royal authority. They turned to the Bible and the role of Protestantism in English history as a means to interpret the activities of their imperial government and even to predict its future actions. For many ministers, the American Revolution was more than a political struggle. It was a fight for the very soul of America. Despite differences of opinion among competing denominations, almost all American ministers were committed to a single cause: the spread of Protestant influence throughout the world and the opposition of any “trace of papal bondage” in the English Empire.¹ Many patriot ministers believed they fought not only against a tyrannical regime committed to reducing Americans to political slavery, but against a conspiracy to strip them of religious freedom in order to impose ecclesiastical oppression and popery in America. The political protest of patriot ministers centered on their concern for protecting the Protestant cause in colonial America against a perceived Catholic conspiracy that first implicated the British ministry and ultimately the king himself. As the nature of their political protest changed from an indictment of the British ministry to a full rejection of the authority of George III, American patriot ministers looked to British history, their current experience, and ultimately the instruction of Scripture as their guide.

Ministers in the revolutionary era held more influence over society as a whole than

¹ Samuel Cooper, *A Discourse on the Man of Sin* (Boston: Mills & Hicks, 1774), 58. Samuel Sherwood also expressed this sentiment in a 1774 sermon, when he called on “all the good *protestants* in this land” to unite against the external threat of popery. Samuel Sherwood, *A Sermon, Containing, Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers, and all Free-born Subjects* (New Haven: T. and S. Green, 1774), 41.

perhaps any other group of educated Americans. Every religious gathering afforded ministers an opportunity to influence their communities as they spoke from a position of great authority and respect. Furthermore, the published sermons of some ministers made it into the hands of thousands of American colonists hungry for familiar language to help interpret their experience.² Ministers used this enormous influence to guide Americans spiritually and politically throughout the revolutionary crisis.

Sermons were not the only published material that helped British Americans identify with the Protestant cause. Brendan McConville argued that a variety of writings such as political pamphlets and especially calendar almanacs helped Americans identify with a shared “imperial historical identity” throughout the early eighteenth century.³ This identity was vital to the emergence of the English Empire after the Glorious Revolution and centered on the Protestant cause in Europe and throughout the world. Americans began to link Protestantism with the succession of English monarchs as writers defined the reign of kings and queens of previous decades by their role in the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism in Britain. In this way, almanac writers, pamphleteers, and ministers alike used the religious nature of the Glorious Revolution to “establish the legitimacy of Britain’s foreign-born Protestant monarchs.”⁴

This last point is especially significant, because it reveals one of the most important responsibilities American colonists in general, and American ministers in particular, expected of their ruling monarch after the Glorious Revolution. In their minds, the most important duty of the king was to advance the Protestant cause in the British Empire. Though William III and the

² Sermons were among the most published material in colonial America. Furthermore, political tracts often used religious language and arguments derived from Scripture, because authors knew that their audience would respond to such vocabulary. The clearest, and most often cited, example of this is Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, which argued in anti-Catholic terms, “Monarchy in every instance is the Popery of government.” Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Edward Larkin (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), 56; Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 73.

³ McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*, 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

Hanoverians were foreigners (the Hanoverians were German and William Dutch), their reign was justified precisely because they were Protestants committed to banishing any sign of Catholic hegemony in Britain.⁵ Samuel Sherwood of Connecticut expressed this view in a 1774 sermon. He argued that the people of Britain were justified in subduing James II and “introducing king *William* . . . to the throne, to sway the scepter in righteousness.”⁶ In the same way, he expressed his confidence in the Hanoverian succession, because they protected England’s Protestant interests. “We must throw up the present constitution of England and the *Hanover* family” he wrote, “and turn back in our allegiance to the *Stuart* family; and to their popish plan of government.”⁷ For many Americans then, and especially for patriot ministers, the British king’s commitment to his role as a protector of Protestant interests was a condition, even a prerequisite, of their continued loyalty.

Many sermons reveal that patriot ministers valued religious liberty above any other freedom they enjoyed and that they believed the slightest increase in Catholic influence in Britain would threaten their right to worship God as they chose. Isaac Backus, a Baptist minister, called “liberty of conscience” the “dearest of all rights,” and did not shy away from criticizing not only Great Britain’s policies but America’s as well.⁸ In a later sermon, he argued that “civil and ecclesiastical government” should remain separate. The church, he believed, armed with

⁵ Ibid., 85-86.

⁶ Sherwood, *A Sermon, Containing, Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers*, 28. Samuel Sherwood was a Congregational pastor from Fairfield, Connecticut. See Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, eds. *A Documentary History of Religion in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003), 227-228.

⁷ Sherwood, *A Sermon, Containing, Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers*, 29.

⁸ Isaac Backus, *A Seasonable Plea for Liberty of Conscience, Against Some Late Oppressive Proceedings* (Boston: Freeman, 1770), 3. Backus, as a Baptist, had a special view on this matter and was much more inclined to criticize not only the religious policies of the English Empire, but social and religio-political norms in America as well. Though Backus and other ministers were grateful to enjoy religious freedom, Baptists had suffered as dissenters in a society with established churches. Baptists were, of course, among the most active advocates for the disestablishment of religion in Virginia and elsewhere throughout the late eighteenth century.

Though Baptists tended to be a largely patriot denomination, some Baptist ministers did remain loyal to Great Britain. Most prominent among Baptist Loyalists was Morgan Edwards of Pennsylvania. See Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Christian University Press, 1977), 117-118.

“*light and truth*” should encourage good in society, while civil government, armed with the “*sword* to guard the peace,” should focus its attention on protecting the liberty of individuals. If the two were separate and did not interfere, “the effects are happy,” but brought together, tyranny would certainly follow.⁹

Henry Cumings, a Massachusetts Congregational minister, expressed the importance of religious liberty along with his gratitude for the religious tolerance he enjoyed as a British subject. In a 1766 sermon, Cumings was happy to praise the English government because of its commitment to religious liberty.¹⁰ He wrote that the “infernial fiend, persecution for conscience sake,” had been “utterly exterminated” in the British Empire. Americans should not take this for granted, he wrote, but pray that this freedom would continue and that America remain “free from papal usurpation and tyranny, the most cruel, and impious of any.”¹¹ Nearly a decade later, in a 1775 sermon, Cumings was relieved to say that, although Britain had encroached on their civil liberties, at least “God has not yet permitted our religious priveleges [sic] to be formally invaded.”¹² Cumings consoled his congregation with the knowledge that, though the British ministry had invaded many of their rights, they held on to religious liberty. He valued freedom of worship above any other political right that might come under attack.

Along with this encouragement, though, Cumings also issued a warning. Religious persecution, he argued, was certain to follow any instance of political tyranny. Religious liberty

⁹ Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty* (Boston: Boyle, 1773), 10, 13.

¹⁰ Cumings was also keen to praise the British government at that moment, because America was celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act that year. He told his congregation that they should be grateful to be called subjects of a government who listened to their petitions. “This year will stand in the annals of this country as one of *the years of the right hand of the Most High*, wherein *British Americans*, were delivered from threatenng slavery, and restored to the embraces of almost exiled liberty.” He insisted that Americans should not blame the king or Parliament as a whole for the oppressive act because the idea rose out of the minds of a few, evil individuals in the British government. Henry Cumings, *A Thanksgiving Sermon Preached at Billerica, November 27, 1766* (Boston: Kneeland and Adams, 1767), 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹² Cumings, *A Sermon Preached in Billerica, On the 23rd of November, 1775* (Worcester, MA: I. Thomas, 1776), 12, 14-15.

remained under threat should Britain's oppressive actions continue, "for civil and ecclesiastical tyranny are nearly allied; and the latter follows close at the heels of the former."¹³ Cumings was not the only American minister to express such a sentiment. Joseph Lyman of Massachusetts also warned his church in 1774 that if they allowed the British government to take their civil rights, their "religion will be driven into the corners."¹⁴ Another Congregationalist from Massachusetts, Samuel Cooper, aligned religious persecution and popery with political oppression in the same way. In a 1773 sermon, he boldly argued that "popery is incompatible with the safety of a free government."¹⁵ Catholicism, he contended "sets up a foreign head, superior to all civil rulers" that has no limit to its power to control every aspect of individuals' lives.¹⁶ This, more than any other principle was Cooper's rallying point for American patriots. What Americans had most to fear was not the king's troops or taxation without representation, but a rise in popish influence in America. He ended his sermon with an impassioned plea to oppose ministerial oppression "and allow . . . *no trace of papal bondage*, to be found among us."¹⁷ American ministers, guided by their mutual history and Protestant religion, drew a deep connection between religious and civil tyranny, between oppression and Catholicism. Any instance of political coercion in the English Empire was evidence of an alarming rise of Catholic influence in one or more parts of the British government.

By 1774, ministers began to express openly the view that there was an active conspiracy

¹³ Ibid., 12n.

¹⁴ Joseph Lyman, *A Sermon Preached at Hatfield December 15th, 1774* (Boston: Edes & Gill, 1775), 26. Lyman hoped that this argument would motivate his congregation to oppose the actions of the British government. This reveals, again, that he believed – and if his argument would be effective, his congregation would also believe – that religious liberty was even more important than other kinds of political liberties, which the British government might threaten.

¹⁵ Samuel Cooper, *Man of Sin*, 58. Aside from associating Catholicism with political oppression, Cooper criticized "the Romish superstition" as a "monument of human sagacity and weakness," and even went so far as to call Catholicism wholly "*antichristian*." Ibid., 5, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59 (emphasis mine).

within the British government to take away American's religious and civil liberties. This conspiracy, they claimed, had its roots among ill-designing individuals within the British ministry. Lyman argued that the ministry used their power over the national treasure to control Parliament, which explains the "most grievous edicts" that that body had enacted in recent years.¹⁸ This statement is particularly significant, because it shows a shift toward blaming the British ministry rather than Parliament for America's persecution. Lyman almost goes so far as to defend the Parliament at the expense of the ministry, even though other groups of Americans, including the Continental Congress, had for some time focused on Parliament as the main source of their oppression in most of their petitions and complaints. The center of blame inched closer to the king himself as the imperial conflict escalated throughout the 1770s.

Henry Cumings expressed similar convictions in a sermon given late in 1775. He endeavored to encourage Americans that, though their country had suffered much, Providence had not forgotten them. He cited several historical and biblical instances of how God directed events to foil the plans of despotism and promote the cause of the oppressed. In a tone that may have suggested eventual independence, he argued that God might have allowed the trouble with Britain to endure so long in order to promote America in the end and lift her up to a place of influence in the world.¹⁹ God was able, he preached encouragingly, to "over-rule the oppressive and arbitrary schemes that are now formed against America." For Cumings as well, the source of

¹⁸ Lyman, *A Sermon Preached at Hatfield*, 18. This sermon is one of the most articulate examples of how much contempt patriot ministers had for the British government, and for the British ministry in particular. "The British administration by the force of great abilities, perverted to base purposes, and by their command of the national treasure, have influenced the Parliament to enact the most grievous edicts against us. Laws made, with the feigned pretense of protecting and securing us, and for the support of civil government, have been the most direct invasion of our property, and subversive of every idea of English freedom."

¹⁹ Cumings, *A Sermon Preached in Billerica*, 9. Though Cumings does not say explicitly that independence was a real possibility at this time, his tone certainly implies such. The present troubles, he wrote, "may have been permitted by him [God], with a view to roll the ball of empire over to this Western world; and to make this land . . . the happy seat of peace, liberty, learning, arts, virtue and religion; where, if any miserable people, in other quarters of the globe, after being stript of the blessings of freedom . . . may find a secure asylum from slavery and oppression, and quietly enjoy the fundamental rights of human nature." Cumings' ruminations would, of course, prove to be prophetic, as he expressed here some of the most fundamental values of the emerging American nation.

these schemes was “unconstitutional and violent ministerial politicks.”²⁰ Nevertheless, in this 1775 sermon, Cumings did not go so far as to blame George III himself for the schemes of his ministers. In fact, in the same way that Lyman defended the British Parliament, Cumings insisted that the king had failed to respond to their petitions, not because he was involved in this plot, but because his ministers had blinded their monarch as part of a conspiracy against America.²¹ Reconciliation with the British government would be almost impossible if the king’s corrupt advisors continued in their plans, but many patriot preachers still hoped that the king, their Protestant protector, would put an end to the scheming of his popish counselors.

Cumings, Lyman, and other American pastors based their fear of an anti-American conspiracy within the British ministry on their mutual experience in the colonial past, the present actions of the British government, and signs of the present and future fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Isaac Backus appealed to the lessons of the British past to discount the concept of “passive obedience and non-resistance to kings,” which loyalist ministers were preaching at the time.²² In his view, by accepting passive obedience, Americans were falling into the same trap as their seventeenth-century ancestors, who waited far too long to resist the despotism of James II. Passive obedience was, Backus wrote “much preached up in James 2ds day, till the nation was brought so upon the brink of popery and slavery that the very bishps [*sic*] who preached that

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 12.

²² Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1979), 2:938. The doctrine of passive obedience was based on a common interpretation of Romans 13, which suggested that any aggressive resistance to government authority was inherently sinful. For an analysis of the Anglican doctrine of passive obedience, see Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism*, 67-70. According to Rhoden, passive obedience and non-resistance were the conservative Anglican church’s two “central tenets” not only concerning the American controversy but for all “political conduct” (67-68). This idea was so ingrained in Anglican political theology that patriot Anglican ministers (which, according to Rhoden, was a substantial group) had to seek a way to reconcile this doctrine with their political protest. David Griffith, an Anglican minister in Virginia, argued famously that God did not require that Christians obey all the commands of government, but only “all laws that are equitable.” If civil laws conflicted with God’s law, Christians not only the right but the duty to disobey. David Griffith, *Passive Obedience Considered in a Sermon Preached at Williamsburg, December 31st, 1775* (Williamsburg: Alexander Purdie, 1776), 11. For a discussion of John Wesley’s and many American Methodists’ adherence to the doctrine of passive obedience, see Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 115.

doctrine up were forced to act against it.”²³ Therefore, Americans, in order to avoid the same struggles as their patriot forefathers, should oppose those in the British government who they believed they were taking them down the path toward tyranny and popery.

Samuel Sherwood also appealed to English history to motivate Americans to oppose the oppressive measures of the British government, which he believed derived from Catholic influence. In the past, Sherwood reminded his audience, England had accepted Catholicism and “the man of sin reigned triumphant in our mother-country, without much check or control.”²⁴ Catholics ruled their mother country before England’s break with the pope under King Henry VIII, then with the bloody reign of Queen Mary, and most recently, the reign of the Stuarts that had met its final end in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Great Britain had only escaped ecclesiastical tyranny through the heroic efforts of their forefathers. Once again, he argued, the present ministry tended to accept popery and might harm the Protestant cause if Americans did not stand up as their ancestors had done and put a stop to their enemies’ schemes.²⁵

Cumings linked his present experience to the historical past in his sermons by recounting several similarities between the conflict with Great Britain and the tyrannical rule of James II. That monarch, “an avowed papist,” as Cumings was careful to point out, sent “Sir Edmond Andros to execute his tyrannical schemes in New-England.”²⁶ Andros, he believed, not only

²³ Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, 2:938-939.

²⁴ Sherwood, *The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness: An Address on the Times* (New York: S. Loudon, 1776), 16. The “man of sin” comes from a verse in 2 Thessalonians concerning Christian eschatology: “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition . . .” Sherwood and others associated the man of sin in this passage with the antichrist, which, in their view, represented the force of popery in the modern world. 2 Thes. 2:3 (this and all subsequent references to the Bible are in the King James Version). See also Samuel Cooper, *Man of Sin*.

²⁵ Sherwood, *The Church’s Flight*, 15-17.

²⁶ Cumings, *A Sermon Preached in Billerica*, 19.

threatened New Englanders' civil freedoms, but the free exercise of their religion as well.²⁷ Had the people not resisted Andros's tyrannical schemes, and God not intervened in Great Britain to depose the "haughty despot," Americans might not have enjoyed the freedoms they had in Cumings's time.²⁸ There was much to fear, because individuals within the British Parliament and ministry had hatched a conspiracy every bit as evil, according to Cumings, as the schemes of the Stuart monarchs. He argued that the Glorious Revolution provided a precedent and justification for America's resistance to what he believed to be tyranny, not of an individual, but of "a number of men."²⁹ Tyranny of an absolute monarch and tyranny of a legislature were the same in Cumings's view, and Americans should resist despotism in any form for the same reason as their seventeenth-century ancestors. Parliament's assertion of their power to "legislate for us 'in all cases whatsoever'" placed Americans in very much the same dangerous position as those who opposed the reign of the Stuarts.³⁰

Cumings feared the present conflict could result in the subjection of Americans' religious liberty, but his most radical arguments revealed his darkest suspicions. He suggested that conspirators within the British government had made it their ultimate goal to depose King George III and return the Stuart family to the throne of England. Cumings argued that they should oppose the British Parliament and ministry in order to protect the king because "his present Majesty's right to the throne depends" on "the principles of the revolutions, which are

²⁷ Ibid. "Men's titles to their estates were declared of no value, and they were called upon to purchase new patents. The people were menaces that their meeting-houses should be taken from them, and the public worship, in the congregational ways, should not be tolerated."

²⁸ Ibid., 19-20.

²⁹ Ibid., 20n.

³⁰ Ibid. Here, Cumings included an extensive quotation from John Dickinson, "An Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great Britain" (Philadelphia: Bradfords, 1774), 70-77. Parliament's expansion of their constitutional powers, Dickinson argued "would place us in the same situation the people of England would have been reduced to, had James the first and his family succeeded in their schemes of arbitrary power. Changing the word *Stuarts* for *Parliament*, and *Britons* for *Americans*, the argument of the illustrious patriots of those times, apply with inexpressible force and appositeness, in maintenance of our cause . . ." With Dickinson's help then, Cumings argued that Americans were already suffering under the despotism that he believed the Stuarts had attempted to bring to British citizens.

evidently in favour of America.”³¹ It was possible, he imagined, that the “movers and abettors of the present oppressive and violent measures . . . are themselves Jacobites in heart.” Possibly, they hoped first to embarrass George III by inciting rebellion among his loyal subjects in America and, taking advantage of the political confusion and the king’s mishandling of the empire, “introduce the Pretender and advance the Stuarts family to its ancient dignity.”³²

Cumings’s accusations are significant for three major reasons. First, they highlight that ministers tended to link their growing fear of a hostile conspiracy in the British government to the history of the Glorious Revolution. The experience of the British Empire in the late seventeenth century gave them a framework to interpret and predict the actions of the British government. The religious concerns underlying the conflict with the Stuart monarchs gave ministers further alarm that the British Parliament and ministry, aside from conspiring to oppress America and even to overthrow the Hanoverian succession, also wanted to limit Americans’ religious freedom and impose a papal regime in America and Britain. The link between religious and civil persecution in the narrative of the Glorious Revolution solidified ministers’ perception of an intimate connection between tyranny and papacy.

Second, Cumings’s suggestion that conspirators might ultimately attempt to dispossess George III and restore his Catholic enemies to power shows a perceived connection between political and ecclesiastical tyranny. English history and other signs³³ spoke to the legitimacy of their suspicion and helps to explain the tenacity of minister’s resistance. The link between political and ecclesiastical persecution, in Cumings’s view of the world, allowed him to reason

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. The severity of Cumings’s accusation may explain why he chose to include this argument in a footnote on page 20 of the printed sermon. Still, he chose to include this information, which suggests that he truly believed such treachery was possible among George III’s closest advisors. Other ministers and lay people likely entertained similar thoughts.

³³ Other signs include the actions of the British government such as the Quebec Act and the sending of troops to invade America along with scriptural prophecies that seemed to refer to their present situation.

that if American ministers were exhibiting unjust tendencies, they must be under Catholic influence and were therefore capable of conspiring to overthrow George III, the Protestant protector of Great Britain.³⁴

Third, Cumings' extreme accusation concerning the treachery of the government's administration suggests that he was willing to go to great lengths to avoid implicating the king in this conspiracy.³⁵ If corrupt ministers were plotting eventually to depose George III, the British monarch would be free from blame for his ministers' actions. While Cumings certainly believed such a treasonous plot was plausible, he may have communicated this view in order to convince himself and others that the king had no knowledge of a growing conspiracy against America. If the king's ministers continued in their plot to reduce Americans to political slavery, it was only a matter of time before Americans would have to hold the king responsible for the actions of his ministers. The possibility of a conspiracy not only against Americans but against the king himself allowed Cumings, whether consciously or not, to postpone or disavow such a disturbing inevitability.

American patriot ministers also pointed to the present actions of the British government as evidence that conspirators were plotting to take away American religious liberty and expand Catholic hegemony in the British Empire. The passage of the Quebec Act in 1774 eroded ministers' trust in the British ministry. Joseph Lyman argued that the Quebec act "shews in it's [*sic*] true light, [the British ministry's] desperate designs."³⁶ The Act, Lyman said, because of the

³⁴ That Cumings actually believed that such a conscious conspiracy in the British government existed may seem farfetched or even fanciful at first glance. Nevertheless, Cumings operated in an understanding of causality that was common in eighteenth-century Atlantic culture. What Wood calls the "paranoid style" found its basis in "particular assumptions about the nature of social reality and the necessity of moral responsibility in human affairs." For background information on the prevalence of "the paranoid style" among enlightenment thinkers in eighteenth-century Atlantic politics, see Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," 401-441, especially 406-411.

³⁵ Cumings' later sermons make it clear that, by 1781, he believed King George III himself was ultimately responsible for the actions of his ministers. Nevertheless, he avoided implicating the king before independence.

³⁶ Lyman, *A Sermon Preached at Hatfield*, 22.

very nature of Catholicism, threatened both American religious liberty and the stability of local governments. By establishing Catholicism in North America and expanding the territory of Quebec, the government had encouraged a religion which was “subversive not only of all other religion, but of all civil government.”³⁷ Furthermore, he argued, the ministry might have established the act in part to turn native Americans and Canadians against British Americans. “This is no *imaginary* Fear,” Lyman wrote, “For the Quebec Bill was made, as it was said in Parliament . . . in order to be a curb upon the licentiousness of the other colonies.”³⁸ Cumings agreed in a 1775 sermon, stating that “From the Canada bill, and some other things favourable to popery, we have grounds to fear” that the British ministry had it in mind to allow popery to “ride triumphant over the heads of true Protestants, making multitudes drunk with the wine of her fornications.”³⁹ Sherwood also suggested that the true aim of the Act was to “bring the savages down upon us, to our utter destruction.”⁴⁰ The passage of the Quebec Act, more than any other event before independence, contributed to the patriot clergy’s fears that members of the British Parliament and ministry were involved in a conspiracy not only to subjugate American liberty but also to harm the Protestant cause in the British Empire.

American preachers also looked to biblical prophecy as a way to understand the significance of the events surrounding them and to express suspicions concerning parts of the British government. The most complete and dramatic example of this is Samuel Sherwood’s January 1776 sermon, *The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness: An Address on the Times*.⁴¹ In this sermon, Sherwood argued that some scriptural prophecies “plainly relate” to the conflict

³⁷ Ibid., 23.

³⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

³⁹ Cumings, *A Sermon Preached at Billerica*, 12n.

⁴⁰ Sherwood, *The Church’s Flight*, 33.

⁴¹ Sherwood gave this sermon in Norfield, Connecticut on Wednesday, 17 January 1776, the day that the Connecticut governor, Jonathan Trumbull, had proclaimed to be a day of public fasting and prayer. For a thorough analysis of this sermon and its historical context see Stephen J. Stein, “An Apocalyptic Rationale for the American Revolution,” *Early American Literature* 9, no. 3 (1975): 211-225.

between Great Britain and British America.⁴² Specifically, he referred to the prophecy found in Revelation 12, which told of the apostle John's vision of a woman, who after giving birth to a child, fled into the wilderness to escape the persecution of a terrifying, seven-headed dragon.⁴³

The dragon in this prophecy, according to Sherwood, referred to Catholicism. He argued that because popery had been the greatest force in history opposed to the true Christian church throughout the world, "we may rationally conclude that more prophecies relate to that, than to any other distant event."⁴⁴ Sherwood's congregation would likely have been familiar with this interpretation of the dragon of Revelation 12 referring to the Catholic Church. Other American ministers held the same view and incorporated it into their anti-Catholic rhetoric.⁴⁵ The corrupting power of popery, he argued, had spread to "all nations and kingdoms of the world in general, and . . . the kings and princes of the earth . . . were to be much intoxicated and infatuated therewith."⁴⁶

Going further than many of his contemporaries, though, Sherwood adopted an even more complex interpretation of the dragon of Revelation 12 and 13, an interpretation that implicated the government of Great Britain as an accomplice to the papal beast's persecution. Revelation 13 speaks of the "image of the beast," which Sherwood argued referred to governments that

⁴² Ibid., 3 (title page). The full title of this sermon is *The Church's Flight into the Wilderness: An Address on the Times Containing Some Very Interesting and Important Observations on Scripture Prophecies: Shewing that sundry of them plainly relate to Great Britain, and the American Colonies and are fulfilling in the present day.*

⁴³ Sherwood spoke from several passages, but the main prophecy that he interpreted came from Revelation 12:13-17, "And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."

⁴⁴ Sherwood, *The Church's Flight*, 10. To support this claim, he also cited several other passages, which he believed also referred to the corrupting power of Catholicism including Isaiah 51, Revelation 13, Psalm 74, and Ezekiel 24.

⁴⁵ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 85-87.

⁴⁶ Sherwood, *The Church's Flight*, 14.

resembled the Roman popery and had fallen under its influence.⁴⁷ Great Britain was one of those governments. Like Sherwood's contemporaries, he offered the Quebec Act and Great Britain's tendency to fall under Catholic influence in the past as evidence that it had risen again in "the ministry and parliament of Great Britain, which appears so favourable to popery and the Roman catholic interest."⁴⁸ Contemporaries of Sherwood, including the rationalist Samuel West, also argued this prophecy might refer to Great Britain because "the description" of the beast in Revelation "will answer better to be understood of political, than ecclesiastical tyrants."⁴⁹

Having established Great Britain's role in the prophecy, Sherwood insisted that it and many other prophecies referred to "the state of Christ's church, in this American quarter of the globe; and will sooner or later have their fulfillment and accomplishment among us."⁵⁰ The establishment of a Protestant empire in America was exceptional in world history, and Sherwood believed God had preserved the established church there for generations in order to advance the cause of Christianity.⁵¹ The woman in the passage, therefore, referred to America, which was in

⁴⁷ Rev. 13:15. Sherwood, *The Church's Flight*, 14-15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁹ Samuel West, *A Sermon Preached before the Honorable Council* (Boston, 1776), 63, quoted in Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 87. Hatch also analyzed Sherwood's explanation of the British government's role in this prophecy. Hatch's analysis, though basically accurate, is overly simplified. According to Hatch, Sherwood based his argument on the assertion that the prophecy "could not be confined 'to so narrow a circle, as papal Rome,' but applied to 'another persecuting tyrannical power,' namely 'the corrupt system of tyranny and oppression, that has been fabricated and adopted by the ministry and parliament of Great Britain.'" While Sherwood did make this statement to support his argument, his assertions were more nuanced than West's. Unlike West, Sherwood did not abandon the interpretation of the dragon of Revelation 12 and 13 as ultimately referring to Catholicism. Rather, the government of Great Britain, and other corrupt world governments were accomplices of the papal dragon under the prophetic symbol of the "image of the beast."

In addition to West and Sherwood, Henry Cumings also referred to this prophecy in *A Sermon Preached at Billerica* published over a year prior to *The Church's Flight into the Wilderness*. Cumings did not go so far as to suggest that the prophecy referred directly to the conflict between Great Britain and British America, but briefly referenced the passage as an illustration of the experience of New England's first immigrants. "One can hardly think of being thus pursued from Britain into the deserts of America, without recollecting that passage in Revelation." Cumings then quoted from Revelation 12. Cumings, *A Sermon Preached at Billerica*, 11-12.

⁵⁰ Sherwood, *The Church's Flight*, 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

the birth pains to deliver the “true church of Christ” to the world.⁵² In line with the prophecy, “our fore-fathers” left England and travelled to “this then howling wilderness” in order to “secure abode for unadulterated christianity, liberty and peace.”⁵³ For generations thereafter, Britain had oppressed America with the help of “evil, wicked men.”⁵⁴ Sherwood cited specific instances throughout history of how Britain had attempted to destroy American religious liberty, giving the names of their oppressors, which included Edmund Andros, Lord Cornbury, Bernard, Hutchinson, Gage, Carlton, and Dunmore. The fact that he referred to both historical and contemporary individuals shows that he believed the current oppressive measures of the British government to be part of one long train of persecutions meant to hinder America’s Christian mission.

Just as the dragon of Revelation 12 became “wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed,” so too Great Britain made war against Americans.⁵⁵ Because all her oppressive measures had failed, according to Sherwood, Britain had finally shown its true schemes in actively waging war against those who most “strictly and conscientiously adhere to the pure uncorrupted doctrine and worship of our pious forefathers.”⁵⁶ The dragon in Revelation made war with the woman’s offspring “which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁷ In the same way, the British government under the antichristian influence of popery also made war against not only America’s civil liberties, but Christ’s “pure

⁵² Ibid., 19. It is important to note that Sherwood was not dogmatic that his was the only true interpretation of this prophecy. He was “of the opinion, that the church of Christ in every age, may find something in this book [Revelation] applicable to her case and circumstances; and all such passages that are so, may lawfully be applied and improved by us accordingly.” So the prophecy may have many valid interpretations in different eras of church history, and this was the fulfillment of this prophecy for their generation. Whether Sherwood believed that the conflict between America and Great Britain was the ultimate representation of this prophecy or simply one of many is unclear. Ibid., 18.

⁵³ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30-31.

⁵⁵ Rev. 12: 17.

⁵⁶ Sherwood, *The Church’s Flight*, 37.

⁵⁷ Rev. 12: 17.

gospel.”⁵⁸

Sherwood’s *The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness* is significant, because it succinctly explained the complexity of the motivation for political protest among many American religious leaders. Sherwood’s analysis of this prophecy linked the political conflict of the 1770s to the greater narrative of the religious mission of the true Christian church. The current contest was, for many American preachers, an essential part of, if not the culmination of, a centuries-old struggle between the evangelistic mission of Christ and the opposing forces of the antichrist embodied in the Catholic-Protestant conflict. American ministers looked to biblical prophecies concerning the end times in order to predict America’s fate, because they believed America was central to this religious struggle. Nathan O. Hatch convincingly argued this point in *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*. According to Hatch, “the cycles of republican history, and . . . Christian eschatology became indivisible,” in the minds of Americans in the latter half of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ If America was to become the location of the prophesied millennial reign of Christ on earth, the conflict with Catholic conciliators in Great Britain, may have been a sign of the ultimate triumph of Christ and his true church. Therefore, ministers such as Sherwood, West, and Cumings applied the Christian eschatological narrative to the political conflict of their time, assigning this narrative’s opposing roles to the main characters of this conflict.⁶⁰

Before independence, American ministers almost always avoided direct criticism of King

⁵⁸ Sherwood, *The Church’s Flight*, 37.

⁵⁹ Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 3. This was especially true of New England ministers.

⁶⁰ Though Congregational patriot pastors such as Sherwood argued that the Revolution was a sign of the rise of the true Christian church in America, many Anglican loyalists argued the exact opposite. Loyalist ministers such as Simeon Baxter, Jonathan Boucher, and Charles Inglis all suggested that the colonial radicals’ actions threatened to upend good government in America, threaten order, and even bring about the “death of Christian culture.” Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 109. In a sermon preached near the end of the War, Simeon Baxter questioned the true Christianity of the patriot cause. How could a movement promising to advance Protestantism throughout the world ally with “the Papists of France?” For him, the Revolution was not an extension of the righteous cause of their English ancestors. Instead, American revolutionaries acted against the “protestant religions, for which our fathers bled and died.” Simeon Baxter, *Tyrannicide Proved Lawful, From the Practice and Writings of Jews, Heathens, and Christians* (London, 1782). See also Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 108-110.

George III from the pulpit. Instead, they blamed Parliament or the British ministry for blinding the king from the suffering and protestations of his loyal American subjects. Individuals from these bodies were engaged in an anti-American and pro-Catholic conspiracy and ministers were unwilling to suggest that the king might be involved. To denounce the king publicly, especially in a time of political upheaval, was an incredibly serious act. Furthermore, to implicate a Hanoverian king, the Protestant protector of England, in a Catholic plot had serious implications beyond the imperial crisis. It is likely that ministers did not criticize the king himself in order to avoid appearing disloyal or too radical.

Examining how patriot ministers reacted to the Declaration of Independence is especially enlightening, because it reveals their true convictions concerning the king himself. Independence radicalized and polarized the conflict with Great Britain. Before July 1776, it was possible to protest the British government without criticizing the king, but after independence, supporting the war amounted to open rebellion against not only Parliament and the ministry but also against King George III himself. There were three degrees of response among those ministers who had supported American patriots before independence.⁶¹

⁶¹ This refers to Congregational, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Anglican ministers who spoke actively in favor of a redress of America's grievances before independence. While this study mainly examines patriot ministers, there were loyalists among each of these denominations. Most prominently, a substantial group of Anglican ministers who remained loyal to Great Britain became the most vocal group of loyalists. Anglican loyalists such as Jonathan Boucher, Charles Inglis, Thomas Bradbury Chandler, and Samuel Seabury argued that the Americans should not be quick to overthrow the proven British system for untested republican form of government. They also cited the principle of passive obedience (see n. 23) and other Biblically-based arguments to convince more Americans to resist the revolutionaries. While the exact number of Anglican clergy who remained loyal to the crown is not available, approximately 79 clergymen were forced to leave America between 1775 and 1783 for their political views, accounting for roughly one-quarter of the American Anglican clergy. Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism*, 102-103.

Though they are usually perceived as patriot denominations, there were also many loyalists among Congregational, Presbyterian, and Baptist ministers. According to Mark Noll, there were at least twenty Congregational ministers in America who were "sympathetic to the Loyalist Cause." These Congregational Loyalists represented several regions (Rev. Jonathan Ashley in the South, Rev. Benjamin Stevens in Maine, and Rev. Ebenezer Pemberton in Boston). *Ibid.*, 121. John Joachim Zubly was the most well-known Presbyterian minister to become an active loyalist, and many Baptists such as Morgan Edwards of Philadelphia also refused to support American patriotism even before independence. For a discussion of Loyalist Christians in America, see Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 103-122.

Some patriot ministers criticized the actions of the British government and even supported the war before July 1776, but withdrew their support immediately after Congress declared independence. This was especially true of Anglican ministers who had all made an oath of loyalty to the British king at the time of their ordination.⁶² Daniel Batwell, an Anglican bishop from Virginia, spoke in support of the war before American troops on 20 July 1775.⁶³ He made it clear, though, that he gave his support under the impression that the “sole aim” of the Continental Congress was to recover Americans’ rights and that they had no intention to establish independence.⁶⁴ True to his word, soon after Congress declared independence, he became an active loyalist.⁶⁵ Batwell’s actions after independence reveal that he was willing to support the American patriots only so long as they affirmed their loyalty to George III.⁶⁶

⁶² For more information on the Anglican oath of loyalty to the British monarch, see Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism*, 70-71. See also, James B. Bell, “The Making of an Eighteenth-Century American Anglican Clergyman,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 106 (1994): 82-111.

⁶³ Daniel Batwell, *A Sermon, Preached at York-Town, Before Captain Morgan’s and Captain Price’s Companies of Riflemen* (Philadelphia: Dunlap, 1775). Batwell was an Anglican minister in York and Cumberland Counties, Virginia. He preached this sermon in honor of a day of fasting recommended by the “Honorable Continental Congress.”

⁶⁴ “If nothing more is designed, than what is professed; if to preserve our rights and privileges be the sole aim of the Continental Congress, and of those who assemble at their biddings; if no sparks of disloyalty, no desire of change, no intentions of removing the ancient land marks, lie concealed beneath the fair outside of public good, I say if this be the case, and according to the best of my observation it really is so, then we have a good cause, and may expect the blessing of Heaven upon our endeavours.” Batwell, *A Sermon, Preached at Yorktown*, 16-17. See also Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism*, 82.

⁶⁵ “Batwell, Rev. Daniel,” in *Biographical Sketches of Loyalist of the American Revolution*, ed. Gregory Palmer (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1984), 215. “Soon after the Declaration of Independence he became an active Loyalist, was apprehended and committed to York jail. Congress gave him leave to dispose of his personal estate, and to remove with his family to the city of New York. In 1782 he was chaplain of the third battalion of New Jersey Volunteers. He went to England, and died there.” See also Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism*, 1.

⁶⁶ Batwell expressed this sentiment clearly in his 1775 sermon. “I have a commission,” he said, “and it is written in the most luminous character of truth; to bid you honour the King – yet I trust you want not that admonition: But I have no commission to bid you honour those, who wickedly stand between the throne and the subject.” Batwell openly criticized those in the British government who were persecuting Americans, but he refused to continue as a patriot if it meant dishonoring the king himself. Batwell, *A Sermon, Preached at York-Town*, 18.

Another example of this group was the Presbyterian minister from Georgia, John Joachim Zubly. Before independence, Zubly spoke out boldly in support of revolutionary principles such as no taxation without representation during the Stamp Act controversy. He served as a member of the Continental Congress and actively petitioned the king to redress American grievances. However, he came into serious conflict with radical delegates when Congress began to turn toward independence in the fall of 1775. Early in 1776, he abruptly left Philadelphia and returned to Georgia. Because he refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Continental Congress after independence, the Georgia Council of Safety arrested Zubly in 1777, declared him an enemy of the state, confiscating his property, and banished him from Georgia. See Randall M. Miller, “Introduction” in *A Warm and*

Other ministers accepted independence, but never gave their full support. Jacob Duché of Philadelphia was one of the most vocal and visible proponents among the Anglican clergy of preserving American liberty. He served as the first chaplain of both the First and Second Continental Congress and often spoke boldly in support of Congress and the war in his sermons.⁶⁷ After independence, he showed his support for the Revolution by omitting the prayers for George III in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Duché support for independence waned in the months following July 1776.⁶⁹ Discouraged by radicals' wholehearted turn toward independence and the perceived futility of the war after the capture of Philadelphia, Duché drafted a letter to Washington in October 1777 encouraging him to give up the cause. What he intended to be a private letter became public, forcing the minister to flee to England in disgrace.⁷⁰

A third group wholeheartedly accepted independence and did not shy away from implicating the king in the plot to bring Americans under political slavery. There is no one clear reason why some patriot ministers renounced George III along with so many of their American compatriots, but the Quebec Act and the dispatch of royal troops against Americans certainly

Zealous Spirit:” John J. Zubly and the American Revolution, *A Selection of his Writings* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 19-27 and Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 119-120.

⁶⁷ His most famous political sermons include Jacob Duché, *The American Vine, A Sermon Preached in Christ-Church, Philadelphia Before the Honourable Continental Congress, July 20th 1775* (Philadelphia: Humphreys, 1775) and Duché, *The Duty of Standing Fast in our Spiritual and Temporal Liberties, A Sermon Preached in Christ-Church July 7th 1775* (Philadelphia: Humphreys, 1775), in which he argued that Americans should oppose Great Britain not only to defend their civil liberties but their spiritual freedom as well. See also Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism*, 69, 78-79.

⁶⁸ Clarke Garrett, “The Spiritual Odyssey of Jacob Duché,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 119, no. 2 (1975): 148. For more information on the seriousness of this act, see Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 111-113.

⁶⁹ Duché apparently did not take the Declaration of Independence seriously at first. A year later, he explained that he had believed the Declaration had been a diplomatic action designed to “procure some favourable terms.” When he realized that Congress was serious in establishing American independence, he resigned the chaplaincy of Congress in October 1776. Garrett, “The Spiritual Odyssey of Jacob Duché,” 148.

⁷⁰ See Kevin J. Dellape, “Jacob Duché: Whig-Loyalist?” *Pennsylvania History*, 62, no. 3 (1995): 293-305; Clarke Garrett, “The Spiritual Odyssey of Jacob Duché,” 143-155; and Jacob Duché, “Copy of a Letter from the Rev. Mr. Jacob Duché, to General Washington,” broadside (Philadelphia, 1777).

eroded their trust in the British monarch. As early as April 1775, Isaac Backus held the king responsible for the Quebec Act privately in his diary. In giving his consent to the act, Backus believed, George III had “violated his coronation-oath, which he had solemnly taken before God and his people.”⁷¹ Certainly, the Quebec Act eroded Americans’ trust in the British government and helped to spread anti-British fervor throughout the colonies. Though many patriot ministers were reluctant to criticize the king actively before independence, they knew that he had given his consent to the actions of his government and, therefore, could not escape blame for long.

In the years following independence, this most radical group of patriot religious leaders began to blame George III in terms even harsher than the language they formally used against his ministers and Parliament. They looked to biblical accounts that they believed described a situation similar to their own in order to understand and express their powerful feelings of betrayal from a king they had once spoken of with great affection and loyalty.⁷² Old Testament accounts of bad kings are abundant, and ministers were drawn to these stories as a justification for their rejection of royal authority. Therefore, sermons explaining these analogies help to clarify why so many American ministers ultimately rejected the king. In each case, the characters of the imperial struggle are fully represented in the accounts of political subjugation in the history of Israel. These stories feature tyrants who either listened to bad advice or allowed their counselors to perform oppressive acts in their name. God exacted his righteous revenge in most cases not on the king’s advisors, but on the wicked king himself. American patriot preachers argued, therefore, that just as God held evil kings responsible for the actions of their royal advisors, Americans ought to hold George III responsible for the scheming of his government.

⁷¹ Backus, *Diary of Isaac Backus*, 2:939; Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 70.

⁷² Loyalist ministers also made use of the Bible to argue their position. For more on the Biblical arguments of Anglican loyalists, see Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 113-114 and Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism*, 66-70.

Whether or not their king was actively involved in a perceived Catholic conspiracy within the British government, American patriot ministers expected him, as the champion of Protestant interests in the British Empire, to put an end to the threat.

A good example showing how Old Testament narratives informed American pastors' interpretation of their political experience is John Lewis's 1777 sermon, *Naboth's Vineyard*.⁷³ Here, Lewis described the story found in I Kings 21 of the wicked King Ahab's oppression of one of his subjects. Lewis stated that the purpose of recounting this biblical story was to remember "acts of ancient tyranny" that "they might be prevented in the future."⁷⁴ He insisted that there was a clear "parallel betwixt" the biblical account of the tyranny of King Ahab and the ongoing conflict between Great Britain and America. Like other ministers before and after him, Lewis assigned the roles of the biblical story to the corresponding characters of his country's political narrative and created an analogy that helped him interpret his experience.

I Kings 21 tells the story of Naboth, a subject of King Ahab, who maintained a small

⁷³ John Lewis was the Anglican rector of St. Paul's church in Stono, South Carolina. He preached this sermon in Stono and again at St. Philip's Church in Charles Town on 1 June 1777 at the conclusion of a time of public fasting and prayer for American soldiers. John Lewis, *Naboth's Vineyard. A Sermon Preached at the Parish Church of St. Paul, Stono, on The Last General Fast Day* (Charleston: Peter Timothy, 1777), 3 (title page).

⁷⁴ John Lewis, *Naboth's Vineyard*, 17. Lewis believed he had a responsibility, for history's sake, to fully understand and remember such "ancient acts of tyranny." The full statement concerning Lewis's motivation for giving this sermon went beyond condemning George III. Lewis gave a profound and beautiful statement on the purpose of historical study. "My friends and brethren," he wrote, "it would be a painful task, indeed, to dwell on the contemplation of human misery - to describe acts of ancient tyranny, and to shew that they have been renewed in the present age with redoubled circumstances of vengeance and oppression - it would be a painful task, to revive, even in imagination, former scenes of cruelty and bloodshed, were it not in expectation, that when they are fairly and impartially exhibited to the view, they might, by a strenuous exertion of our own, be prevented for the future." Lewis expressed a similar sentiment earlier in the sermon. "If we shall unfold the records of antiquity, he wrote, "we shall meet with many instances of cruelty, injustice, and oppression. And would to heaven it could be asserted without violation of the truth, that the present times did not afford examples similar to those, which on this occasion might be adduced from ancient History." Ibid., 6.

King Ahab and George III were motivated, according to Lewis, by the same brand of cruelty and oppressive designs, and the America's struggle was as worthy of historical remembrance as the biblical account of Ahab and Naboth. Indeed, Lewis suggested here that the acts of tyranny told in ancient history were just as likely to occur in his time and had in fact "been renewed in the present age." Lewis hoped that his words would not only motivate his countrymen to oppose Great Britain but also remind them that it was their responsibility to be vigilant in the future, because men and women of their own time were no less capable of tyranny and oppression than the evil kings of ancient history.

vineyard close to Ahab's palace. King Ahab asked Naboth to give him the vineyard in exchange for a better vineyard or "the worth of it in money."⁷⁵ Naboth refused, saying, "The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."⁷⁶ Ahab was displeased and went home to brood. His wife, Jezebel, saw him pouting and promised to give Naboth's vineyard to her husband. In Ahab's name, she charged Naboth with "blasphem[ing] God and the king" and had him stoned to death so that Ahab could take possession of his vineyard.⁷⁷

Lewis went on to draw parallels between the characters of the biblical story and the conflict with Great Britain.⁷⁸ Naboth represented America, which was "firmly opposing and rejecting" Great Britain's persecution.⁷⁹ Ahab represented King George III, who, he believed, was the final instigator of America's oppression.⁸⁰ These parallels would be enough to fill a sermon, but Lewis's analogy went even deeper. Jezebel, king Ahab's "most illustrious advisor" fulfilled the role of George III's evil ministers who had conspired to destroy American liberty and impose papal tyranny.⁸¹ Like the executive administration of Great Britain, she carried out the oppression and murder of Naboth in order to please her king.

Lewis's analogy might have been enough to implicate only the British ministry. After all, there is nothing to indicate in the biblical account that King Ahab took direct action or even had any knowledge of Naboth's murder. Jezebel carried out the act using Ahab's name and seal.

⁷⁵ I Kings 21:2. "And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, "Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house: and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it; or, if it seems good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money."

⁷⁶ I Kings 21:3.

⁷⁷ I Kings 21:13. The full biblical account of this story is in I Kings 21:1-29.

⁷⁸ Lewis, *Naboth's Vineyard*, 11-12. "The comparison," he wrote, "which might be drawn betwixt our situation, and the situation of Naboth, is too obvious to be here mentioned." In this statement, Lewis was referring directly to Ahab asking Naboth to give him his vineyard rather than to the story as a whole. Still, it is clear from Naboth's entire sermon that he expected the analogy to be obvious to his hearers and readers.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 6. This description referred directly to Naboth, but since Lewis made the analogy between Naboth and America clear, his words here apply to America as well.

⁸⁰ Lewis took his time in directly stating that Ahab represented King George III himself. Nevertheless, by the end of his sermon he explicitly stated this analogy. "The present king of Britain – this modern Nero – this illustrious representation of Ahab . . . has at once thrown off all disguise." *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Nevertheless, Lewis insisted that King Ahab (and thus George III) was culpable and ultimately responsible.

Lewis criticized Ahab for demanding Naboth's vineyard in the first place. Interpreting Naboth's words in his own terms, Lewis gave him a notably Republican voice: "The inheritance I now possess, my fathers had from God, and not from thee [Ahab]: From them and from the Almighty I derived it . . . This being the case then, why should I resign it? . . . Notwithstanding thy exalted rank . . . I will on no account whatever give up mine inheritance."⁸² Naboth was justified in refusing his king, because his right to defend his property came from God. Ahab had no right to demand Naboth's vineyard, because the ownership of property is a right given by God and not by government.⁸³

George III had demanded American's property just as Ahab had unjustly demanded Naboth's vineyard. Furthermore, Lewis argued that George III was a tyrant not only as bad as Ahab, but far worse, because he had demanded much more of his American subjects than Ahab had demanded of Naboth. Great Britain, Lewis argued, was trying to take away "even the great and glorious inheritance of liberty, by far more precious than all the vineyards upon earth."⁸⁴ George III, "this modern Nero – this illustrious representation of Ahab . . . has . . . had the insolence and presumption to demand our whole inheritance of us" under threat of violent destruction.⁸⁵

Ahab was responsible for the actions of Jezebel just as King George III was responsible for the actions of his ministry. Ahab's selfishness, he believed, fueled and affirmed Jezebel's

⁸² Ibid., 10.

⁸³ Ibid., 11. Ahab, he argued, though he enjoyed every possible luxury, "demand[ed] that small and fertile vineyard of Naboth – even that vineyard which his forefather had bequeathed to him as his only inheritance."

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 19. This statement is the most intense and direct indictment of King George III in the entire sermon. Lewis made it clear that he believed the British monarch to be nothing more than "a modern Nero" determined to destroy America's wealth and liberty.

cruelty. Lewis insisted that “kings seldom fail of finding counsellors [*sic*] exactly adapted to their will, however desperate, bloody or vindictive their measures may be.”⁸⁶ What Jezebel did to Naboth and what the king’s ministers had done to America was the chief sovereign’s fault because, Lewis insisted, “tools of state, and instruments of tyranny” are extensions of royal power.⁸⁷ Lewis demanded that King George III be held exclusively responsible for Great Britain’s actions because Great Britain’s persecution originated from him.⁸⁸ Lewis ended his sermon by encouraging his audience to stand firm in the confidence that, just as God punished Ahab for Naboth’s murder,⁸⁹ God would punish George III and “restore his people once more to peace and happiness.”⁹⁰

Henry Cumings offered another excellent example of how American preachers used biblical analogies to indict King George III in a sermon preached at Lexington in April 1781, the sixth anniversary of the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in that town. The main goal of his sermon echoed his 1775 address. He sought to encourage his readers and listeners that, although they had experienced many years of warfare and difficulty, God would direct events for the good of America. Cumings argued that God could use the evil deeds of prideful and haughty tyrants to produce an outcome that they did not plan for, an outcome that would

⁸⁶ Ibid. 14.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Ahab’s cruelty, Lewis concluded, “destroyed but one man” but “his most *gracious* and most *sacred* *majesty* of Britain is not contented with the death of thousands.”

⁸⁸ Ibid. “His cruelties (for as they originate from him, his they are) are as such as must disgrace a civilized being, and . . . even shock a savage.”

⁸⁹ I Kings 21 describes how God punished Ahab. The prophet Elijah rebuked Ahab using God’s direct words. Ahab repented of his sin before Elijah, tearing his clothes, fasting, and laying in sackcloth. Because he had repented, God promised not to “bring the evil in his [Ahab’s] days: but in his son’s days will I bring the evil upon his house.” I Kings 21:17-29.

⁹⁰ Lewis, *Naboth’s Vineyard*, 23. Lewis made an interesting statement at the end of this sermon, which may indicate that, like many of his contemporaries, he saw America as the last hope of the true Christian church. He told his audience to go forth “In this hope then, or rather in this confidence” that God would “restore his own people once more to peace and happiness, if not for their own sakes, *yet for the sake of his ever-blessed son, our mediator and redeemer Christ Jesus.*” In this last statement he suggested that God would help America not only to bring justice to their country, but in order to advance the cause of Christ. For Lewis and other ministers, the cause of the gospel may have been at stake in the conflict with Great Britain. Ibid., 22-23 (emphasis mine).

contribute to their own destruction and the good of those they meant to destroy. In order to solidify this point, Cumings gave many examples throughout Scripture of how God worked everything for the good of the oppressed and marginalized along with a detailed analysis of the many ways that God intervened in biblical history.⁹¹

Cumings placed the greatest importance on one scriptural story, the story of Rehoboam found in 1 Kings 12. He emphasized this passage because it contained close parallels with the political conflict with Great Britain. 1 Kings 12 contains the scriptural account of Rehoboam's rise to the throne after the death of King Solomon and the beginning of a rebellion against his rule. When Rehoboam became king, the "congregation of Israel" came to him and asked that he lighten the "heavy yoke" of his father.⁹² Before giving his response, Rehoboam sought the advice of his counselors. The old men who had advised his father recommended that Rehoboam do as the people asked.⁹³ Rehoboam did not take their wise advice, but instead took the counsel of "the

⁹¹ Cumings, *A Sermon Preached at Lexington, On the 19th of April, 1781* (Boston: Benjamin Edes & Sons, 1781), 13-19. Cumings listed four ways that God "restrains *the wrath of man*, and defeats its pernicious devices, when and so far as he pleases" (15). First, he argued that God sometimes acts by "raising a spirit of fear" to discourage tyrants and their servants (15). Other times, God interferes in the affairs of men by "interposing unthought-of accidents, obstacles and difficulties, which entirely disconcert their measures and overthrow their mischievous schemes and devices" (16). In other cases, God might cause evil men to "adopt counsels and measures" that "defeat their designs" (17-18). Here, Cumings cited the story of Absalom's revolt against King David found in 2 Samuel 12-15. Absalom took the advice of one of King David's treacherous advisors, Ahithophel. Though Ahithophel was highly regarded "a judicious and skillful counselor," the Lord used his counsel against Absalom to thwart his schemes (18). The most important and common way that God intervened in instances of oppression, though, was by "rousing those who suffer, or are likely to suffer by" the actions of a despot, "and inspiring them with courage and resolution, to oppose and resist, to the utmost, all the mischievous efforts of" their persecutors (18-19). Cumings saw himself as a tool for God to use for just this purpose. He sought to inspire his fellow Americans to continue to resist George III and his oppressive government.

⁹² 1 Kings 12:3-4. Presumably, by "heavy yoke," the Israelites referred to high taxation under Solomon. Cumings told the story in a language familiar to him and his congregation. 1 Kings 12 described the scene as if a large group of people, "the congregation of Israel," came to Rehoboam and literally spoke to him face to face. Cumings described the scene differently: "the people applied to him, with their petitions, for a redress of grievances." Rather than speaking to the people directly as Scripture describes, Cumings's Rehoboam, "rejected their petitions with insult." He used this sort of language, either consciously or subconsciously, in order to draw a parallel between the Israel of Rehoboam's reign and America of George III's reign. Though the two nations responded to their monarch in different ways, the spirit of their actions was the same. Cumings, *A Sermon Preached at Lexington*, 11.

⁹³ 1 Kings 12:7.

young men that were grown up with him.”⁹⁴ They advised that he should not only deny the people’s request, but make their burden even heavier. When Rehoboam told the people of his plan, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel rebelled against him. The nation split in two and would not be reunited for centuries.

Cumings argued that God was working against Rehoboam in order to bring about this “revolution.”⁹⁵ 1 Kings 12:15 indicates that “the cause was from the Lord,” which meant, in his view, that the people’s revolt was “agreeable to the will of God.”⁹⁶ Cumings spoke in general terms of God’s ability to turn the wickedness of individuals toward their own destruction and the greater good of his people.⁹⁷ Cumings believed that God would do the same for America and turn the evil actions of King George III and his government toward their good, although early in the sermon he did not say so explicitly.

Toward the end of his sermon, however, Cumings openly stated the implications of this story. In a clear transition in the sermon he turned to “an application of what has been said, adapted to the present occasion.”⁹⁸ The preacher believed that Rehoboam was a symbol for King George III, who also took the advice of unwise ministers in ignoring American’s petitions. Just as God directed the actions of Rehoboam in order to bring about the good of Israel, Cumings argued that he could “assign this as the reason, why the British king, instead of hearkening to the cries and prayers of his loyal subjects in America, should either treat their complaints and petitions with neglect, or answer them only with insult and additional injuries”⁹⁹ George III, like Rehoboam was “blinded” by his ambition and took action that forced a revolt of his loyal

⁹⁴ 1 Kings 12:10.

⁹⁵ Cumings, *A Sermon Preached at Lexington*, 11.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12. “God often *taketh the wise in their own craftiness*; causing the measures which they principally depend upon, for accomplishing their ambitious designs, to produce events directly contrary to their views and expectations.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

subjects, who only wanted to serve him with dignity and respect.¹⁰⁰ The British monarch, in the same way as Rehoboam, followed the counsel of his foolish advisers, because their advice was in line with his own ambition. George III, therefore, was the immediate cause of the revolt. If he had acted differently, Cumings was convinced, America would have reconciled with Great Britain. In the end, the blame was entirely on the king's shoulders.

The political protest of many patriot ministers, not unlike politicians and planters, changed from a focus on the actions of Parliament and the British ministry to a full-fledged rejection of King George III as their sovereign king. Throughout their journey, their contemporary experience, their understanding of the British past, and analogies from biblical stories shaped their decisions. Great Britain's tendency to come under the tyrannical influence of Catholic oppression as told in British history coupled with the signs of oppression that marked their own time, convinced many ministers that a conspiracy had formed in their imperial government to destroy American liberty and reestablish popery throughout the British Empire. Even scriptural prophecy seemed to point to the corruption of the British government and the inevitable persecution of Protestant America. As their suspicions grew, many patriot ministers avoided implicating the king in this plot. Nevertheless, the king's refusal to hear American's petitions and his failure to restrain his corrupt ministers eventually led to their rejection of his authority, especially after independence. When they denied the king himself and embraced America as a separate and sovereign nation, ministers looked to Scripture as both a justification for and a means of expressing the renunciation of their former monarch.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Cumings insisted that Americans did not wish to bring about their own independence before the outbreak of war. "Had our petitions and prayer been properly regarded," he argued, "and moderate pacific measures pursued, we should have entertained no thoughts of a revolt; for even after hostilities had commenced, we were ardently desirous of continuing united with our mother country, if such an union could have been preserved, without making a sacrifice of our liberties." Ibid.

Conclusion

Four years after the Declaration of Independence, Samuel Cooper gave a sermon on the day of the “Commencement of the constitution” of Massachusetts.¹ He urged Americans not to look back to their monarchical roots but instead embrace the new republic, which they had built for themselves and which they still fought to establish. He looked to the example of the nation of Israel, who after the Babylonian captivity, returned to their homeland and did not reestablish a monarchical form of government, which had led to their oppression and suffering. Instead, Cooper argued, they established a republic. The people of Israel elected “men of principal character and influence . . . to conduct their affairs.”² These leaders would find their authority not through arbitrary inheritance but, as according the prophet Jeremiah, they were to be elected representatives arising out of the body of the people.³ Just as Israel, after her time of suffering, did not establish a new monarchy in their land, so America, Cooper urged his fellow countrymen, after she escaped from monarchical oppression, should embrace a new form of government.

Cooper’s sermon reveals one of the most important implications of the American Revolution. The renunciation of George III as America’s sovereign resulted in much more than American independence. Indeed, it marked a radical shift in America’s culture. The American Revolution represents the great transition of how a monarchical America became a republic

¹ Samuel Cooper, *A Sermon Preached Before His Excellency John Hancock, Esq. . . . Being the Day of the Commencement of the constitution and Inauguration of the New Government*, in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805*, ed., Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1:629.

² *Ibid.*, 633.

³ *Ibid.* Cooper quoted from Jeremiah 30:21: “And their nobles shall be of themselves, and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them; and I will cause him to draw near, and he shall approach unto me: for who is this that engaged his heart to approach unto me? saith the Lord.” Jer. 30:21.

increasingly based on equality.⁴ The experience of Americans with the British government helped to ensure that America could no longer operate under the authority of a hereditary monarch. As different groups of individuals moved from protesting parliamentary authority to criticizing the king's ministers and ultimately rejecting King George III himself, they set in motion a series of events that would make the budding nation unique in the world.

Understanding the reasons why Americans rejected royal authority during the revolutionary era, then, is vital, because it brings greater clarity to Americans' decisions in succeeding decades.

The motivations of those who embraced independence, though, were not uniform, precisely because Americans' individualized experiences during the Revolutionary era were also not uniform. Different groups of people rejected the king for different reasons, because their perceptions of the king's responsibilities were as diverse as the people that made up America.

For Continental Congress, the king's own words, and more importantly the delegates' perception of the meaning of those words, convinced them that reconciliation was impossible and independence was the only option available to secure American liberty. The First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia beginning in September 1774 to convince George III "to recommend to his parliament of Great Britain the total revocation" of the acts they believed were suppressing Americans' rights as Englishmen.⁵ They wanted him to stand between them and Parliament to protect them from the oppression of a body that they believed exercised no legitimate authority over them. Even after the outbreak of war, they continued to see him as their protector, blaming the king's ministers rather than the king himself for executive actions against

⁴ Gordon Wood's classic work, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, argues this point. The idea of equality, which arose out of revolutionary rhetoric, Wood said, "was the most radical and most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution." The words of equality resulted in an unintended consequence of the Revolution, the breakdown of hard distinctions between social classes in America. The Revolution went far beyond the founders' intentions as Americans began to see the world differently. No man, despite their education or talent, was truly better than anyone else. This change in American culture manifested in every institution. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 5, 232.

⁵ Jefferson, "A Summary View," 16.

America. Nevertheless, their loyalty did not last. A series of speeches and proclamations from the king convinced them that he would not heed their petitions and in fact was the leader of a plot to destroy American liberty. The delegates of Congress operated in the world of politics, and in this world, words are often more informative than deeds. Their unique experience as leading politicians led them to reject the king, because he chose to use his influential voice to encourage rather than discourage their persecution.

In the South, the daily lives of many planters involved the task of managing the daily operations of their plantation kingdoms. The role they played as a ruler over their slaves informed how they believed their kingly ruler should govern his subjects. They believed they had a duty to ensure that they heard their slaves' complaints of mistreatment and that they always acted for the justice of their people. If they ensured this service to their slaves, they expected the same of their own superiors, right up to the king himself. In the same way, then, they expected George III to hear Americans' protestations and act justly. When the weight of events made it clear that he would not act on their behalf, planters rejected him as an incompetent ruler, no more fit to run a plantation than an empire.

As many Southern planters judged the king by his competency as an impartial judge in the imperial conflict, patriot religious leaders expected their king to fulfill the role of a Protestant protector. American ministers constructed their relationship with their king based on the role of Protestantism in English history and the teachings of Scripture. The religious motivations of the Glorious Revolution tied the Protestant mission to the image of the post-Stuart monarchs in the British Empire. Not only did they hold him responsible to advance the Protestant cause throughout the world, but also that he should block any encroachment of Catholic influence in English society or government. With this in mind, many American pastors became convinced

that a Catholic conspiracy had arisen among the British ministry. They believed this conspiracy, as evidenced by the Quebec Act, planned to destroy not only Americans' political freedoms but also their cherished religious liberty. When George III failed to bring justice to his Protestant kingdom, the most radical patriot ministers rejected him as an unfit protector of Protestant interests. They turned to the lessons of Old Testament narratives as a guide. There they found that God held wicked kings responsible for not only their own unjust actions but also the actions of their advisors. They used the Bible both to reject royal authority and rally Americans to the patriot cause.

These three groups of Americans, viewing the world through the lenses of their own unique experiences, lost faith in the king's authority at different times and for different reasons. Nevertheless, the process that politicians, planters, and ministers underwent was remarkably similar. Patriots in each of these groups all began by protesting the authority of Parliament and the actions of the British ministry. Throughout their protest, they protected their political and emotional connection to the monarchy. At different times and for different reasons, however, the object of their protest shifted dramatically against the king himself after a perceived betrayal on the part of George III eroded their affection and loyalty. Many Americans within each group believed that the king either refused or failed to protect them from forces within the British government intent on harming Americans. This led them to sever ties with the monarchy and ultimately the entire British government.

Politicians, planters, and pastors characterized their initial protest based on their unique experiences, but for all of them, the king's betrayal was the root cause of the turn toward independence. The early stages of the imperial crisis arose out of a variety of political or economic causes, but the decision for independence was by-in-large emotionally driven.

Ultimately, America became an independent nation, not solely out of a disagreement concerning politics or economics, but because of a sudden breakdown in the intimate relationship between Americans and their king.

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