

# Whose Rebellion? Reformed Resistance Theory in America: Part II

SARAH MORGAN SMITH AND MARK DAVID HALL

## Abstract

Students of the American Founding routinely assert that America's civic leaders were influenced by secular Lockean political ideas, especially on the question of resistance to tyrannical authority. In the first part of this series, we showed that virtually all Reformed writers, from Calvin to the end of the Glorious Revolution, agreed that tyrants could be actively resisted. The only debated question was *who* could resist them. In this essay, we contend that the Reformed approach to active resistance had an important influence on how America's Founders responded to perceived tyrannical actions by Parliament and the Crown.

In the first part of this series, we showed that virtually all Reformed writers, from John Calvin to those writing at the end of the Glorious Revolution, agreed that tyrants could be actively resisted. The only debated question was *who* could resist them.<sup>1</sup> In his *Institutes*, Calvin seems to require that resistance be led by inferior magistrates, although there are good reasons to believe that by the end of his life he came to the conclusion that private citizens may actively resist tyrants. Later Calvinists, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, clearly embraced this latter position.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Morgan Smith and Mark David Hall, "Whose Rebellion? Reformed Resistance Theory in America: Part I," *Unio cum Christo* 3.2 (October 2017): 169–84.

Following the Glorious Revolution, colonists in Britain's American territories no longer needed to worry about the potential threat to their liberties from a Catholic monarch. For a brief period, they were able to focus on the threats to Protestants elsewhere in Europe, most especially those being persecuted in France and the Palatinate. New Englanders received updates on the situation not only from personal correspondents overseas but also in the local press, which "regularly reported on the Camisard revolt and the Huguenot persecutions" with the explicit aim of providing those inclined to pray for the situation the information necessary to "order their prayers and praise."<sup>2</sup>

Such reports inspired not only the prayers but also the activism of at least some Reformed leaders such as Cotton Mather, who frequently employed his pen to publicize accounts of the sufferings of his coreligionists.<sup>3</sup> In 1725, Mather drafted *Une grande voix du ciel à la France* (*A Loud Voice from Heaven to France*), an exhortatory pamphlet aimed not at Americans but rather at the persecuted French church.<sup>4</sup> In his diary, Mather stated that he believed the tract to be "calculated for the Awakening of the people [in France]."<sup>5</sup> Mather—who hoped to smuggle the book into the hands of the faithful via sympathetic acquaintances in Holland—urged persecuted Protestants in France to consider themselves as the agents of divine justice against their oppressor. In other words, the tract was essentially a call for these individuals to take it upon themselves to initiate a revolutionary action through which God might liberate his people from their popish persecutors.<sup>6</sup> While it is unclear whether Mather's work ever reached any actually oppressed believers, his stance on the legitimacy of individual rebellion against tyrannical governments clearly had not changed in the intervening decades since he helped lead the overthrow of the Dominion of New England in 1689.

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kidd, "'Let Hell and Rome Do Their Worst': World News, Anti-Catholicism, and International Protestantism in Early-Eighteenth Century Boston," *New England Quarterly* 76.2 (2003): 275, 277–79.

<sup>3</sup> See list of publications in Howard C. Rice, "Cotton Mather Speaks to France: American Propaganda in the Age of Louis XIV," in *New England Quarterly* 16.2 (June 1943): 198–233.

<sup>4</sup> Catharine Randall, *From a Far Country: Camisards and Huguenots in the Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 100.

<sup>5</sup> Cotton Mather, *Diary*, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, Seventh Series; quoted in Rice, "Cotton Mather Speaks to France," 198.

<sup>6</sup> See Rice, "Cotton Mather Speaks to France," 198–233. See also, Catharine Randall, *From a Far Country*, 100.

## I. *The Road to Independence*

In his well-known 1747 election day sermon, Congregationalist minister Charles Chauncy (1705–1787) approvingly referenced the overthrow of James II and Governor Andros. He noted that an

unhappy instance [of tyranny] was seen in the arbitrary reign of King James the second, in person at home, and by his representative [Dominion of New England Governor Edmund Andros] here; as a check to which, those entrusted with the guardianship of the nation's rights were spirited to take such measures, as issued in that revolution, and *established of the succession*, on which his present majesty's claim to the British throne is dependent.<sup>7</sup>

Parliament's actions against James II can easily be viewed as lesser magistrates checking a tyrant. His approval of the actions of Boston's "mob" (and later, of the *former* elected officials of the colony) against Governor Andros indicates that Chauncy supported private individuals actively resisting tyranny if inferior magistrates were not available or willing to do so.

In 1749, Congregationalist minister Jonathan Todd preached an election day sermon in Connecticut that addressed the relationship between civil rulers and the people. In it, he contended that the

Doctrine of Obedience & Subjection to Magistrates, hath doubtless been carried too far by those, who allow the People to make no Resistance, nor Self-Defence, under the most *arbitrary & illegal* Abuses of Power. ... Doubtless, when *the whole Head is sick*, and the Foundations of a State are removed, when the governing Powers become tyrannical & arbitrary, and usurp a Power that never was given them, and *evidently* go counter to the Instructions of that great *Lord*, by whom they rule, the Law of Self-Defence is in Force amongst a People, and they may judge, that GOD is to be Obeyed rather than *Man*.<sup>8</sup>

Given his rejection of passive resistance in the first part of the quoted passage, it is difficult to read the second as doing anything other than justifying the right of the people to actively resist a governing power that has become "tyrannical and arbitrary."

A year later, on the one-hundredth anniversary of the beheading of Charles I, Boston Congregationalist minister Jonathan Mayhew preached *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher*

<sup>7</sup> Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, *Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009), 187.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Todd, *Civil Rulers the Minister of God, for Good to Men* (New London: Timothy Green, 1749), 32 (emphasis in original).

*Powers*. John Adams later wrote that anyone who wished to understand “the principles and feelings which produced the Revolution” should study “Dr. Mayhew’s sermon.”<sup>9</sup> Mayhew not only offered a vigorous defense of the historical revolt against Charles I, but he also made a clear philosophical argument that Christians have a duty to actively resist a tyrannical government and addressed the question of who can properly resist tyrants. In this case, he emphasized that it was “Not by a private *junto*;—not by a small seditious *party*;—not by a *few desperadoes*, who, to mend their fortunes, would embroil the state;—but by the LORDS and COMMONS of *England*.”<sup>10</sup> By answering his own question in this manner, Mayhew implies that a small group of private persons offering active resistance to Charles to advance their own interest would have been inappropriate. Like most Reformed thinkers, Mayhew seems to find comfort in the fact that lesser magistrates were in agreement regarding Charles (although support for the revolution and tyrannicide was not as widespread among members of Parliament as he appeared to believe).<sup>11</sup>

Intriguingly, in a footnote five pages earlier, Mayhew engages in an extensive discussion of the purpose of government, which he believes is the “common good and safety of society.” He rejects the idea that the people are incapable of judging whether governments are appropriately pursuing this end, writing,

To say that subjects in general are not proper judges when their governors oppress them, and play the tyrant; and when they defend their rights, administer justice impartially, and promote the public welfare, is as great *treason* as ever man uttered .... they are the proper judges when they [princes] execute their trust as they ought to do it;—when their prince exercises an equitable and paternal authority over them;—when from a prince and common father, he exalts himself into a tyrant.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> John Adams to William Tudor, April 5, 1818, in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, 1856), 10:301.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* (Boston: D. Fowle, 1750), 44; available at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=etas>.

<sup>11</sup> Chauncy and Mayhew were theologically more liberal than their fellow Reformed ministers, but with respect to political theology they represent well views widely held by Calvinist clergy. On the latter point, see Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (1928; repr., New York: Frederick Ungar, 1965); Keith L. Griffin, *Revolution and Religion: American Revolutionary War and the Reformed Clergy* (New York: Paragon House, 1994); and Martha Louise Counts, “The Political Views of the Eighteenth Century New England Clergy as Expressed in Their Election Sermons” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1956).

<sup>12</sup> Mayhew, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*, 39. For yet another example of a Reformed minister authorizing active resistance to tyrannical government, see Samuel Phillips, *Political Rulers Authoriz’d and Influenc’d by God our Saviour, to Decree and Exercise Justice* (Boston: John Draper, 1750), 33.

Although he does not clearly state it, an obvious inference from this passage is that if the inferior magistrates do not actively resist a tyrant, the people themselves are capable of discerning when a ruler ceases to be a ruler and should be overthrown. This interpretation is substantiated when we compare it to Mayhew's more informal comments on the subject in his correspondence with the English scholar and philanthropist Thomas Hollis. Describing the colonists' reaction to the Stamp Act, Mayhew wrote,

So great is the detestation in which it is had, that I am satisfied it will never be carried into execution, unless it is done at the point of the sword, by a large army, or rather, by a number of considerable ones, at least one in each colony; there being about sixty thousand fighting men in this province only: and it is given out by many, that they will spend their last blood in this cause.<sup>13</sup>

Here and elsewhere in the correspondence, Mayhew questions the wisdom of the colonists' resolve to defend their rights even unto death, but not its justice or morality. Indeed, he almost seems to take for granted the legitimacy of such forcible resistance to political oppression. What is perhaps even more significant is that nowhere in his writings to Hollis does Mayhew comment upon the leadership of the patriot movement as particularly culpable for the choice to take up arms: throughout the correspondence, he refers simply to the people themselves as the agents of resistance.

Apart from these sorts of affirming references to the actions taken by their seventeenth-century predecessors, within the American context Reformed thinkers seem to have centered their rhetorical consideration of rebellion around the question of religious liberty. Even as some colonies became more Anglicized culturally and politically in the early- to mid-eighteenth century, Reformed leaders remained suspicious that Church of England missionary efforts in the colonies were covertly aimed at destroying their religious freedom. Much ink was spilled in defense of the right of the people to resist impositions upon their consciences, most particularly in the form of a Church of England establishment. Particularly eloquent was Elisha Williams, Congregationalist minister, rector of Yale College, and former tutor of Jonathan Edwards.<sup>14</sup> Dissenters and others argued that because genuine faith could not be coerced, religious conformity had not only temporal but eternal consequences. Moreover, they pointed out that

---

<sup>13</sup> See Bernhard Knollenberg, Thomas Hollis, and Jonathan Mayhew, "Thomas Hollis and Jonathan Mayhew: Their Correspondence, 1759–1766," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 69 (1947): 175. See also similar remarks on 178.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Elisha Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants" (1744), in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730–1805*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1:55–65.

governments that attempted to usurp freedom of conscience were unlikely to flinch at usurping other liberties as well. Taken together, these assertions justified if not immediate resistance at least an increased vigilance; leaders across the colonies (but particularly in New England) exhorted their congregants to be wary of Crown policies that seemed to endorse the Church of England over other denominations.

The Stamp Act crisis of 1765 raised important constitutional issues about the proper scope of Parliament's power. In Massachusetts' election day sermon of that year, Congregationalist minister Andrew Eliot rejected the doctrine of "passive obedience and non-resistance in all cases," however cautiously:

I am sensible, it is difficult to state this point with precision; to determine where submission ends and resistance may lawfully take place, so as not to leave room for men of bad minds unreasonably to oppose government, and to destroy the peace of society. Most certainly people ought to bear much, before they engage in any attempts against those who are in authority; they ought to consider their rulers as frail and fallible men, who are liable to mistakes and faults, when their general aim is good and right; they should overlook their errors, and even their vices, if they are not such as tend directly to overturn the state, and to bring distress and ruin on the whole community. Better a particular person, yea many individuals should suffer, than to encourage civil broils and a public disturbance.<sup>15</sup>

Although "people ought to bear much," Eliot implies that there may come a time when the people have borne enough and may justly and actively resist tyranny. Later that year he condemned the violence of Boston mobs, and there is little doubt he preferred that active resistance be led by an inferior magistrate, but again the logic of his sermon points toward at least the possibility of private individuals acting against unjust rulers.<sup>16</sup>

In the face of elite and popular opposition, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act. But in a move seemingly designed to stoke the fears of a people on the lookout for tyranny, Parliament insisted in the Declaratory Act of 1766 that it had the right to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever."<sup>17</sup> Calvinists (and others) found these words not only objectionable but heretical: God alone could claim absolute sovereignty over man.

---

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Eliot, *A Sermon Preached before His Excellency Francis Bernard* (Boston: Green & Russell, 1765), 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Lee Steward, "Justifying Revolution: The American Clergy's Argument for Political Resistance, 1763–1783" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 56. Steward's work contains a host of other examples of American clergy condoning active resistance by both inferior magistrates and the people.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Frohnen, ed., *The American Republic: Primary Sources* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 136.

Parliament's claim to absolute authority seems to have moved Mayhew more clearly toward a position in favor of individual resistance. In *The Snare Broken* (1766), he explicitly raises the question of private resistance:

I will not meddle with the thorny question, whether, or how far, it may be justifiable for private men, at certain extraordinary conjunctures, to take the administration of government in some respects into their own hands. Self-preservation being a great and primary law of nature, and to be considered as antecedent to all civil laws and institutions, which are subordinate and subservient to the other; the right of so doing, in some circumstances, cannot well be denied.<sup>18</sup>

While this is not precisely a call for arms, it is a reminder that it is in the nature of people to look to their own preservation and to resist those things (including governments) that threaten them to the best of their ability. Although Mayhew continued to shy away from articulating any specific threshold for individual rebellion, he clearly presented it as an undeniable, and thus legitimate, inherent right.

For some Reformed laymen, the coincidence of the crisis over parliamentary supremacy and attempts to establish an American episcopate during the 1760s brought matters to precisely this point of no return.<sup>19</sup> In a series of newspaper essays that were circulated and reprinted in cities across the middle colonies, William Livingston in New York and another unknown writer in Pennsylvania exhorted their fellow colonists to resist the ecclesiastical establishment on the grounds that it was simply the first step toward utter tyranny.<sup>20</sup> Writing as *An American Whig* and as the *Sentinel* respectively, Livingston and the unknown author reminded their audience of the historical link between bishops and tyranny. Given this record, they argued that Americans would do well to recognize the proposed episcopal establishment as a ruse, the first step toward the gradual erosion of civil and

<sup>18</sup> In Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons*, 1:263.

<sup>19</sup> See generally Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mire and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689–1775* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> The authorship of the *Sentinel* essays appears to be one of history's unsolved mysteries. For an account of the controversy, see "The Newspaper Controversy, 1768–1769," in Arthur Lyon Cross, *The Anglican Episcopate and the American Colonies* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 195–214. Livingston's sensitivity to tyranny and views on resistance may have been influenced by his studies at Congregationalist Yale College and were certainly in keeping with his membership in one of New York City's Presbyterian congregations. Livingston is named as the representative of the congregation in their search for a new minister in a 1755 document, and he later served as their representative to a Society of Dissenters organized to protest the episcopal establishment. See "An Early Document Concerning the First Presbyterian Congregation of New York," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 1.3 (1902): 236–45 and Herbert L. Osgood, "The Society of Dissenters Founded at New York in 1769," *American Historical Review* 6.3 (1901): 498–507.



religious liberty. While the immediate actions of the government might seem innocent—might even seem to comport with the public interest—they were in truth merely the first steps toward despotism. If Americans complied with Parliament's demands in this matter, Livingston argued, the government would require greater and greater concessions "till the deluded people are gradually wormed out of their liberty, and at last find the shackles of slavery effectually rivetted."<sup>21</sup> Although Livingston and his anonymous colleague did not actually advocate violence, their essays (which were collected and published in book form along with their opponents' rejoinders) provided a common set of religious arguments in favor of resistance in principle that any individual who became convinced of the immediate necessity of taking up arms might use to justify the decision.

At around this same time, Livingston also participated in the founding of the Society of Dissenters in New York. Comprised of representatives from the city's congregations, two Presbyterian and one Baptist, the Society's stated purpose was the preservation of the colonists' "civil and religious Liberty." Such an end "merits our most vigorous efforts," they continued, adding further that all men who valued freedom "will acknowledge it our indispensable Duty, by every lawful means to preserve it to ourselves and transmit it to Posterity."<sup>22</sup> Chief among these means would be the formation of similar "such Societies, to correspond with each other on these interesting concerns; and thereby endeavour the preservation of our Common Liberty" in the other colonies. While the New York Society did not advocate for armed resistance outright, its appeal to the diverse dissenting population throughout the British colonies for mutual support and organization can be seen as a first step toward the creation of an institution with the ability to intercede between individuals and the government when needed. While it is unclear how long the organization continued its operations (its extant records begin in February 1769 and end in March of the same year, although references to it appear in contemporary newspapers through to September 1769), what is clear is that Livingston and his fellow organizers—who shared deeply Reformed religious convictions—had no qualms about organizing themselves and their fellow colonists into a sort of ad hoc body of lesser magistrates for the purposes of resisting a government they found oppressive.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *American Whig* [No. II], in *A Collection of Tracts from the Late News Papers, &c. Containing Particularly the American Whig, A Whip for the American Whig, with Some Other Pieces, on the Subject of the Residence of Protestant Bishops in the American Colonies, and in Answer to the Writers Who Opposed It, &c.* (New York: John Holt, 1768[–1769]), 6.

<sup>22</sup> The draft of the letter is reprinted in Osgood, "Society of Dissenters," 504–7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 506. The circular letter was printed in the *New York Gazette* on July 24, 1769, and





*An Attempt to Land a Bishop in America.*

That *An American Whig*, the *Sentinel*, and the Society of Dissenters were part of a much broader attempt to marshal Reformed resistance theory against the actions of Parliament can be seen in an engraving done by an unknown artist from the same period entitled “An Attempt to Land a Bishop in America.”<sup>24</sup> The print vividly illustrates the mingling of religion and politics in colonial opposition to the proposed American episcopate: an

this was followed by “a few other references to the matter ... in contemporary newspapers, but nothing of special consequence.” See *ibid.*, 499.

<sup>24</sup> *An Attempt to Land a Bishop in America*. London, 1768. Engraving, artist unknown. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-13637.

enraged crowd of men is gathered along the shoreline, using a miscellany of placards, banners, and books bearing the names of prominent thinkers associated with liberty of conscience (including Sydney and Locke) to threaten a robed figure on board a docked vessel. In the face of their opposition, the erstwhile bishop exclaims (somewhat ironically): “Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace,” while simultaneously ducking a volume labeled “*Calvin’s Works*.” The artist’s choice of *Calvin’s Works* here as the first missile to hit the target indicates the degree to which the contemporary audience understood the role of Reformed resistance theorizing in supporting their opposition to the British imperial policy.

The Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, brought about an escalation of rhetoric; among the many outraged responses to the incident was Congregationalist minister John Lathrop’s sermon, which boasted the sensational title *Innocent Blood Crying to God from the Streets of Boston*. Lathrop’s sermon was not only political but personal: one of the victims, James Caldwell, had been a member of his congregation at North Church. Nevertheless, he insisted that his response was not merely born of passion; rather, it reflected “sentiments adopted by all who are upon principle friends to the Glorious Revolution ... sentiments which brought our fathers into this new world.”<sup>25</sup> The connection between the colonists’ current oppression by the crown to their forefathers’ earlier flight from religious and civil tyranny gave Lathrop courage to assert boldly that resistance against all “persons disposed to rob men of that liberty which the God of nature designed his rational creatures should enjoy” was not only justifiable but laudable.<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, John Tucker’s Massachusetts election day sermon the next year condemned mob violence and counseled patience, but he recognized that a time might come when the people must “unite the members of society as one body” to defend themselves.<sup>27</sup>

The Coercive Acts of 1774, which among other things closed Boston harbor, further stoked concerns that Parliament was becoming tyrannical—and not just in Massachusetts. In Connecticut, Samuel Sherwood preached a powerful fast-day sermon concerning the importance of rulers acting in a just manner. When they do not, active resistance is justified, just as when “the British nation acted, as a body, in deposing king *James* the second, that tyrannical oppressive prince.”<sup>28</sup> While Sherwood did not call for active

<sup>25</sup> John Lathrop, *Innocent Blood* (Boston, 1770), iii.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> John Tucker, *A Sermon Preached at Cambridge* (Boston: Richard Draper, 1771), 29.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Sherwood, *A Sermon Containing Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers* (New Haven: T. and S. Green, 1774), 28.

resistance, he did note approvingly that “the conduct of the several provinces thro’ the continent, in sending commissioners to meet in general congress, to secure the threatened liberties and properties of the people, may be justified on these principles.”<sup>29</sup> Such congresses became in a real sense the *de facto* lesser magistrates on both the colonial and intercolonial levels, particularly in light of the regular dissolution of colonial legislatures by unsympathetic royal governors. Comprised as they often were of men of largely Reformed commitments (especially in New England), we find it unsurprising that such groups adopted resolutions that reiterated standard Reformed resistance theorizing.

Consider the example of the Second Provincial Congress of Massachusetts. Although not a Calvinist body *per se*, the vast majority of its members were members of Reformed churches. In 1775, the body issued “An Address to the Inhabitants of Massachusetts Bay” proclaiming that “Resistance [to tyranny] is so far from being criminal, that it becomes the christian and social duty of each individual.”<sup>30</sup> Coming from what was arguably a body of “lesser magistrates,” the actions of the Congress could be viewed as conforming to the more conservative resistance theory of Calvin’s *Institutes*. However, taken literally, this text seems to support the *duty* of *individuals* to resist tyranny.

This turn in the rhetoric can also be seen in a sermon preached to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Boston Massacre by Congregationalist minister Oliver Noble. Noble offered the character of Mordecai from the biblical story of Esther as an exemplar of godly behavior under political oppression.<sup>31</sup> Acting only as a private citizen, Mordecai took the initiative “after seeking divine help and aid” to attempt to remonstrate with the king about the situation, using “the most probably means” available to him—in this case, the pleadings of Queen Esther on behalf of her people.<sup>32</sup> This, Noble argued, was evidence that God intended every individual (man or woman) to use his or her own strength and resources to bring an end to political tyranny, rather than to submit to it passively. Indeed, he says elsewhere that as God intended for men to be free, anyone who “tamely submits

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. In an appendix to Sherwood’s sermon (and printed with it), Connecticut Congregational minister Ebenezer Baldwin makes a similar argument (47–81).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 130.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Noble, *Some Strictures upon the Sacred Story Recorded in the Book of Esther* (Newburyport: E. Lunt & H. W. Tinges, 1775). Noble served as the chaplain to the Twelfth Massachusetts militia regiment when it was ordered to New York in 1776; see John James Currier, *History of Newburyport, Mass., 1764–1905* (Newburyport, 1909), 2:91.

<sup>32</sup> Noble, *Some Strictures*, 13, 15.

to *Slavery*, like a foolish or wanton *Heir*, spends the PATRIMONY of his Heavenly Father's *giving*, and is a *rebel* to GOD and NATURE."<sup>33</sup> That this extended to violent rebellion was confirmed by the fact that the king's response to Mordecai and Esther was not to prevent the assault against the Jews, but rather, to consent to their right of self-defense.

Noble contended this was simply a confirmation of the "grant that every man has from the King of Heaven, 'to arise, and stand for his Life, to kill and destroy all that ASSAULT them.'"<sup>34</sup> Were his readers to miss the obvious connection to their contemporary situation, Noble added an explanatory note in which he simultaneously encouraged the people to respect public officials so long as they were "faithful [in the] discharge of the duties of their station," while also assuring them that "the moment they [public officials] become unconstitutional and inconsistent with Liberty, they are to be detested and opposed with firmness." To preempt arguments against resistance as uncharitable, Noble added, "Every kind of love should be absorbed in the love of Liberty, except the love of GOD, which, indeed, is connected with, and involved in it."<sup>35</sup> Yet in the same sermon, he also suggests that it would be more prudent of Americans to "by no means strike the first, but be ready to strike the second blow, to advantage."<sup>36</sup> To prepare both spiritually and materially for resistance was one thing; to actively resist, Noble seemed to imply, one had to be unquestionably under attack (as, indeed, Massachusetts was by this point).

Also in 1775, Jonathan Edwards Jr. preached a sermon to the "annual Freeman's Meeting for voting." In it, he utterly rejected the "doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance," and contended that "the whole spirit of scripture sustains ... that rulers are bound to rule in the fear of God and for the good of the people, and if they do not, then in resisting them we are doing God service."<sup>37</sup> Edwards was not advocating active resistance at this point, but there is no doubt that he thought it could be justifiable. Because he was preaching before his congregation (as opposed to a formal election day sermon before the General Assembly) the "we" quoted in the last sentence must refer to the free citizens of Connecticut, not inferior magistrates.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., footnote 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, D.D.*, ed. Tryon Edwards (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1854): 2:238, 244–45.

For a final example, and many more could be given, Samuel West, in his famous Massachusetts election sermon of May 29, 1776, observed that if magistrates become tyrannical, “they cease being magistrates, and the people, which gave them their authority, have a right to take it from them again.”<sup>38</sup> A few pages later, West made it clear that “the community is under the strongest obligation of duty both to GOD and to its own members to resist and oppose [tyrannical rulers].”<sup>39</sup>

## **II. *There Were Many Reformed Ministers and Civic Leaders in the Founding Era***

Sydney Ahlstrom, in his magisterial history of religion in America, estimates that the Reformed tradition was “the religious heritage of three-fourths of the American people in 1776.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Yale historian Harry Stout states that prior to the War for Independence “the vast majority of colonists were Reformed or Calvinist.”<sup>41</sup> Our extensive review of Founding era clergy and civic leaders shows that far from being outliers, Chauncy, Mayhew, West, and the other Calvinists discussed above represent well the consensus view among Calvinists that tyrants may justly be actively resisted. Because the opposition was led by inferior magistrates—i.e., colonial legislatures or intercolonial congresses—there was no need to debate whether private citizens could offer active resistance to Parliament and the Crown.

Not only were many of America’s civic leaders Calvinists, but they were also familiar with Reformed political literature. Princeton President John Witherspoon, for instance, owned Calvin’s *Institutes*, Beza’s *Rights of Magistrates* (1757), and Buchanan’s *The Law of Scottish Kingship* (1579).<sup>42</sup> At the Constitutional Convention, Luther Martin read passages from “Locke & Vattel, and also Rutherford [presumably *Lex, Rex*]” to show that states, like people, are equal.<sup>43</sup> In 1766, George Buchanan’s *De Jure Regni: Or the Due Right of Government* was reprinted in Philadelphia—seven years

<sup>38</sup> Samuel West, *Sermon Preached before the Honorable Council, Massachusetts-Bay* (Boston: John Gill, 1776), 123.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>40</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 1:426.

<sup>41</sup> Harry S. Stout, “Preaching the Insurrection,” *Christian History* 15 (1996): 17. Portions of this section are drawn from Mark David Hall, *Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 81.

<sup>43</sup> Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911), 1:438.

before the *Second Treatise* was first printed in America. The Unitarian-leaning Congregationalist John Adams declared that John Poyntet's *Short Treatise on Politike Power* (1556) contains "all the essential principles of liberty, which were afterwards dilated on by Sidney and Locke." He also noted the significance of *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*.<sup>44</sup> Later in life, Adams wrote, "I love and revere the memories of Huss Wickliff Luther Calvin Zwinglius Melancton and all the other reformers how muchsoever I may differ from them all in many theological metaphysical & philosophical points. As you justly observe, without their great exertions & severe sufferings, the USA had never existed."<sup>45</sup> There is no shortage of evidence that civic leaders in the founding era were aware of Reformed political thinkers and their major doctrines.

In a 1775 speech urging reconciliation between Great Britain and the colonies, Edmund Burke warned his fellow members of Parliament that Americans "are Protestants; and of that kind which is the most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion. This is a persuasion not only favorable to liberty, but built upon it."<sup>46</sup> A few months later, British Major Harry Rooke confiscated a presumably Calvinist book from prisoners taken at Bunker Hill and remarked, "It is your G-d Damned Religion of this Country that ruins the Country; Damn your religion."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the Loyalist Peter Oliver railed against "Mr. Otis's black Regiment, *the dissenting Clergy*, who took so active a part in the Rebellion."<sup>48</sup> King George himself reportedly referred to the War for Independence as "a Presbyterian Rebellion," a sentiment echoed by a Hessian soldier who described it as "an Irish-Scotch Presbyterian rebellion."<sup>49</sup> In 1780, Anglican clergy in New York wrote, "Dissenters in general, and particularly Presbyterians and Congregationalists were the active Promoters of the Rebellion" because "from their infancy [they] imbibe Republican, levelling Principles."<sup>50</sup> The

<sup>44</sup> Adams, *Works of John Adams*, 6:4.

<sup>45</sup> John Adams to F. C. Schaeffer, November 25, 1821, in *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations*, ed. James H. Hutson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15–16.

<sup>46</sup> Edmund Burke, "On Moving His Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies," in Edmund Burke, *Conciliation with the Colonies*, ed. Cornelius Beach Bradley (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1895), 20.

<sup>47</sup> John Leach, "A Journal Kept by John Leach, During His Confinement by the British, in Boston Gaol, in 1775," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 19 (1865): 256.

<sup>48</sup> Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, eds., *Peter Oliver's Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 41.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 173; Johann Heinrichs to Herr H., January 18, 1778, in "Extracts from the Letter Book of Captain Johann Heinrichs of the Hessian Jager Corps," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 22 (1898): 137.

<sup>50</sup> Clergy of New York, October 28, 1780, quoted in Patricia Bonomi, "'Hippocrates' Twins": Religion and Politics in the American Revolution," *History Teacher* 29.2 (February 1996): 142.



best historians have long recognized that there was an “almost unanimous and persistent critical attitude of the Congregational and Presbyterian ministers toward the British imperial policy.”<sup>51</sup>

### III. *The Declaration of Independence*

The influence of Reformed political ideas on American patriots is sometimes overlooked because students of the era focus on the Declaration of Independence as *the* statement of why separation from Great Britain was justified. Moreover, they often read the document in light of the views of its primary drafter, Thomas Jefferson, an Anglican who was more influenced by the Enlightenment than virtually any other American. Yet the Declaration was the product of a community, a large percentage of which were Calvinists.

On June 11, 1776, Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman to a committee to draft a Declaration of Independence. Jefferson wrote the initial draft, but as Pauline Maier, has observed, “[i]n the end, the efforts of these five men produced a workable draft that the Congress itself, sitting as the Committee of the Whole, made into a distinguished document by an act of group editing that has to be one of the great marvels of history.”<sup>52</sup> Late in life, Jefferson wrote to Henry Lee that when drafting the Declaration he did not set out to “find principles, or new arguments,” but that it was an “expression of the American mind” whose authority rests “on the harmonizing sentiments of the day.”<sup>53</sup> Even Jefferson recognized that it is a mistake to read the document in light of his private views; it must be interpreted in light of the community that drafted and approved it.

The final version of the Declaration begins:

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Baldwin, *The New England Clergy*, 91.

<sup>52</sup> Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 98 and generally 97–153.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, *Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 1993), 656–57.

<sup>54</sup> Dreisbach and Hall, *Sacred Rights*, 220.



Significantly for our purposes, the Declaration is unclear about who or what, exactly, is declaring independence. The text begins by suggesting it is states—united, to be sure, but still “States.” But states as states are incapable of doing anything, so it is perhaps more useful to turn to the last paragraph, which makes it clear that “the representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled” are acting. By almost any measure, these representatives appointed by colonial assemblies and acting together in a national congress are the sort of “inferior magistrates” who may properly and actively resist tyrannical authority, according to the most conservative interpretation of Calvinist resistance theory.

And yet the Declaration’s first paragraph also suggests that it is “one people,” that is, the American people, who are declaring independence. The Declaration’s famous second paragraph expands upon the importance of the people for America’s experiment in self-government:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.<sup>55</sup>

These words reflect arguments long made by patriots in New England, many of whom likely never read Locke and almost all of whom were serious Calvinists. Of course, their primary drafter, Jefferson, definitely read Locke and was most certainly not a Calvinist. Jefferson indisputably borrowed language from Locke, but for Roger Sherman and other Calvinist delegates, the famous paragraph quoted above predated Locke by years. There is little evidence that Sherman and the delegates with Reformed backgrounds—such as William Williams, Samuel Huntington, Oliver Wolcott, Josiah Bartlett, William Whipple, Matthew Thornton, John Hancock, Samuel Adams, John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, William Ellery, William Floyd, Philip Livingston, Richard Stockton, John Witherspoon, John Hart, Abraham Clark, James Smith, James Wilson, Thomas McKean, and Lyman Hall—viewed these ideas through a secular Lockean lens and every reason to think that they embraced them as consistent with their Reformed convictions.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Of course, some of these men were better informed and more consistent Calvinists than others, and we have not carefully explored the political writings of each and every one of these founders. We are familiar with many of them, however, and think there are very good reasons

## Conclusion

In part one of this article, we suggested that early Reformed political thinkers were torn between doctrines that seemed to point logically toward justifying private people actively resisting tyrannical authority and a distrust of the people. In America, colonists had had almost two hundred years of experience governing themselves, especially in New England. Although Calvinists can never embrace an optimistic view of human nature, we suspect this long experience in self-governance encouraged civic and religious leaders, many of whom came from humble backgrounds, to have greater faith in the ability of people to govern themselves. These leaders were thus more willing to consider the possibility that even persons could justly offer active resistance to tyrannical authority.

Between 1765 and 1776 there was little discussion of *who* may properly resist tyrannical acts by England because by any measure active resistance was led by inferior magistrates—first, colonial legislatures, and then a national Congress consisting of representatives appointed by these legislatures. If there were Calvinists who believed that only inferior magistrates could actively resist tyranny, they would have been satisfied. This helps explain, we think, the virtually universal support Reformed/Calvinist clergy and elected officials gave to the Patriot cause. By way of contrast, Anglican clergy in America were split almost exactly fifty-fifty in their support or opposition to the Patriot cause.<sup>57</sup>

After Westminster Seminary President Peter Lillback asked us to write an article on this topic for *Unio cum Christo*, we asked him if we could survey Westminster graduates on the question of who may appropriately and actively resist tyrants. He agreed to let us do so. Thirty-three individuals

---

to believe that they were directly or indirectly influenced by the Reformed political tradition.

<sup>57</sup> For further support of this proposition, see Hall, *Roger Sherman*, passim. With the exception of the Swiss-born Presbyterian John Joachim Zubly and a few Old Lights, we have found very few Reformed ministers in America who opposed the War for Independence. Randall M. Miller, ed., *"A Warm and Zealous Spirit": John J. Zubly and the American Revolution* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982); Adrian C. Leiby, *The Revolutionary War in the Hackensack Valley: The Jersey Dutch and the Neutral Ground, 1775–1783* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1962), esp. 20–25; and Mark A. Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Christian University Press, 1977), 120–21. Unlike Calvinist clergy, Anglican ministers in America were more equally divided. Among those in America from 1775 to 1783, 128 were Loyalists, 130 were patriots, 71 fled, and the opinions of 59 are unknown. One might expect these men to be loyal to the king, who was, after all, the head of their church. Their country of origin may also have been a significant factor. In 1775, 141 Anglican ministers were born in America, 134 were born outside of what became the United States (primarily England and Scotland), and the birthplace of 36 is unknown. James B. Bell, *A War of Religion: Dissenters, Anglicans, and the American Revolution* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 240, 244.

responded to our survey, of which thirty-two identified their theological convictions as being “Reformed.” They split fifty-fifty on whether active resistance to tyrannical government must be led by inferior magistrates, or whether private people could offer such resistance. It is telling that *none* of the respondents denied that tyrannical government may be actively resisted, even though they were given this option as one of three choices.

We hesitate to generalize from a survey to which just thirty-three individuals responded, but we must say that we are not surprised by the results. Virtually every significant early Calvinist leader agreed that tyrannical authority could and should be actively resisted, the only debated question being who could resist it. Although the logic of the Reformation opens the door for private resistance, some Reformed leaders, who were often elites, were hesitant to travel down this road. Over time, more and more Calvinists permitted or even encouraged private citizens to resist tyranny, but there always remained those who believed that only inferior magistrates could properly lead such resistance.

Of course, these debates did not disappear with independence; they resurfaced from time to time, most notably before and during the American Civil War. But these controversies go well beyond the scope of our two essays. For our purposes, it is enough to conclude that anyone who hopes to have an accurate account of the causes of the American War for Independence simply cannot ignore the influence of the Calvinist political thought.