“All Those Truly Acquainted with the History of Those Times”: John Adams and the Opposition Politics of Revolutionary England, ca. 1640–41

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IN July 1766, John Adams announced in his diary that he had “accidentally found a curious Volume of pamphlets.” In truth, Adams’s first law clerk had discovered it “in a Chest of Books” belonging to his deceased uncle Ames Angier, and Oakes Angier brought the volume to Adams’s attention. “The Title Page and all the rest is gone till you come to the 18th Page,” Adams observed, but what survived appeared “to be a Collection of Pamphlets published in the memorable Year 1640,” which had been “bound up together in one Quarto Volume.” After describing the physical characteristics of the book, Adams recorded the approximate titles, subjects, and dates of twenty-nine pieces.¹ The list’s specificity is unusual for the diary. Although Adams often recorded his reading, he rarely

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provided such extensive detail on ephemeral pamphlets. By stressing the “accidental” and “curious” way in which the book had been brought to light, he implied that such historical unearthings were rare. An unexpected find, the volume intrigued Adams as a material object. So did its contents. It was an artifact from the English Revolution. Drawn from a number of parliamentary documents published in London, the pamphlets illustrate the opening months of the English Revolution, which began in 1640 when King Charles I was obliged to appeal to Parliament to secure funds to suppress a rebellion in Scotland.

Charles had assumed the throne in 1625. Over the course of his early reign, he frequently clashed with Parliament over funding and taxes. In 1629, he dissolved that representative body and did not call its members into session again for eleven years, a period referred to as his “Personal Rule.” During that time, he pursued a policy of “thorough” in both church and state. His ministers—most notably William Laud, the archbishop of Canterbury, and Thomas Wentworth, the Earl of Strafford—enforced monopolies, imposed religious uniformity, and levied such taxes as ship money, tonnage and poundage, and the forced loan to secure nonparliamentary sources of revenue for the Crown. Having married a French Roman Catholic, Henrietta Maria, Charles stirred the suspicions of many puritans, who suspected him of being a closet Catholic. Once summoned by the king, the so-called Long Parliament proceeded to address the many grievances that had accumulated over the eleven years it had been out of session. Insisting upon major political, economic, and religious reforms, Parliament inadvertently launched a revolution that, in less than ten months, brought about that body’s ascendancy over the Crown.²

As the legal instruments of Stuart censorship, the prerogative and ecclesiastical courts of the Star Chamber and High

Adams and Opposition Politics

Commission, broke down under parliamentary pressure in the early 1640s, printers began producing and widely distributing speeches, political tracts, petitions, and prophesies in inexpensive pamphlet form. This explosion of printed materials created an unprecedented public forum for debating such controversies as church government, the royal prerogative, and the liberties of English subjects. The contents of the volume that engaged Adams’s interest proceeded from this printing revolution. The speeches therein attack ministerial corruption, church government, and ecclesiastical conformity, publicize articles of impeachment against three of the king’s ministers as well as a petition for abolishing the episcopacy, and delineate staunch opposition to the Church of England, a conflict that compelled many puritans, including some of Adams’s own ancestors, to flee to the New World.3 These publications launched a war of words against ministerial and episcopal corruption that preceded the outbreak of civil war (1642) and the regicide of Charles I (1649).4 Although England’s republican experiment eventually failed when the Stuart monarchy was

3The titles that Adams listed in abbreviated form align with the table of contents of a volume of parliamentary proceedings, *Speeches and Passages of This Great and Happy Parliament: From the third of November, 1640 to this instant June, 1641. Collected into One Volume, and according to the most perfect Originals, exactly published* (London, 1641), and so I think we can safely assume that this, or some variant of it, is the volume he had in hand. The title page of his text apparently being lacking, he mistakenly listed the publication date as 1640 rather than 1641. The pamphlets collected in *Speeches and Passages* had appeared originally as individual tracts, published individually in 1640 and 1641, and number more than the twenty-nine Adams listed. Because I cannot identify the exact volume Adams consulted, I have decided to quote from the tracts as originally and separately published rather than as they appeared in the 1641 collection.


Yet, historians have not fully examined how America’s revolutionary generation used the historical experiences of the mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution to frame and justify their opposition to British imperial authority. David Hackett Fischer and Sacvan Bercovitch have emphasized the continuities between the puritan founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and their revolutionary descendants, and Alfred Young has illustrated the extent to which colonial folk culture helped preserve the memories of the 1640s and 1650s. However, Brendan McConville reminds us that the English Revolution was not a universal “reference point” for British North American colonists. On the contrary, their attitudes were mixed. For some, the revolution highlighted the dangers of political disorder; for others, it supported resistance to tyranny.\footnote{David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and *Liberty and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 19–36; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (1980; repr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); Alfred F. Young, “Tar and Feathers and the Ghost of Oliver Cromwell: English Plebeian Culture and American Radicalism,” in his *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 144–79; and Brendan McConville, *The King’s...
the late eighteenth-century imperial crisis invariably brought memories of that revolution to mind.

The political values of puritanism especially influenced the reactions of many colonists to imperial reforms. Traditionally, historians have focused on the religious rather than the political dimensions of puritanism in early America, but David Hall has recently argued that the experience of living under the early Stuart monarchs inspired among the puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony an intense fear of arbitrary government. This fear persuaded them to limit the power of church and state authorities in the commonwealth they established. Likewise, Michael Winship contends that the wide-ranging reforms puritans undertook in 1630 Massachusetts constituted a novel form of governance, a godly republicanism that necessarily affected how their descendants viewed their political world. In fact, Winship observes, “a historian of the seventeenth century gets an eerie sense of déjà vu when reading of . . . the imperial innovations of the 1760s and 1770s.” This enticing historical parallel, which remains relatively unexplored, raises an important question about the ideological and the regional origins of the American Revolution: how did the puritan experience of tyranny shape the opposition to British imperial authority, especially in New England? John Adams’s encounter with

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the volume of English revolutionary pamphlets from the early 1640s presents a rich opportunity to ponder that question.\(^8\)

During the mid-1760s, Adams inhabited a historical moment markedly similar to that of his puritan ancestors. With its victory in the Seven Years War (1756–63), Great Britain had acquired new territories, and it was busily reorganizing and centralizing its empire. It had also accumulated vast debt, which it sought to pay down by extracting revenue from the colonies through such measures as the Sugar Act and Stamp Act. For many colonists, especially in New England, the mid-eighteenth-century proliferation of monopolies, taxes, and regulations recalled the dangerous consolidation of authority undertaken by the Stuarts in the seventeenth century.

Opposition in Massachusetts was not immediate, but in time it gathered force. At first, merchants, lawyers, and other influential colonists published learned tracts and newspaper essays that branded the English initiatives as unconstitutional. After news of the Stamp Act reached the colonies in 1765, resistance grew widespread. Colonists from all social ranks engaged in traditional rituals of popular protest to demonstrate their disdain for the stamp tax. On 14 August 1765, the Loyal Nine, an association of prominent Bostonians who were descended from the original puritan colonists, identified Andrew Oliver, the appointed stamp distributor, as the proper target for the community’s ire. A crowd hanged Oliver’s effigy from the Liberty Tree, carried a coffin containing his “body” through the streets of Boston, then beheaded and burned the effigy, pulled down the stamp tax office, and ultimately destroyed Oliver’s home. On 26 August, another mob destroyed the home of Thomas Hutchinson, lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts and Oliver’s brother-in-law. Similarly violent protests occurred all along the eastern seaboard, as the colonists effectively nullified a parliamentary

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\(^8\) Previous historians have not considered this volume in relation to Adams’s Revolutionary politics. To my knowledge, Warren Hasty Carrol is the only scholar who has noted the diary entry’s potential significance, but he did not explore it. See his “John Adams, Puritan Revolutionist: A Study of His Part in Making the American Revolution, 1764–1776” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1959), pp. 32–33.
act. However, in the course of repealing the law, Parliament reasserted its right to govern the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” In the following decade, Parliament continued to pass restrictive legislation, such as the Townshend Duties, the Tea Act, and the Coercive Acts. In response, many patriots experimented with various forms of opposition rhetoric and resistance before declaring their independence in 1776. Although independence was not an inevitable outcome of these imperial conflicts, in retrospect the Stamp Act crisis was seen as the opening act of the American Revolution.⁹

That crisis launched Adams’s career as a revolutionary and statesman. In its midst, he defended the rights of Englishmen in print, advised the Sons of Liberty, and composed the influential Braintree Instructions, which declared the stamp tax unconstitutional. Though he feared the excesses of mob rule, Adams praised the “unconquerable Rage of the People,” which forced the “Stamp Distributors and Inspectors . . . to renounce their offices.” “The Crown officers have everywhere trembled,” he observed, “and all their little Tools and Creatures have been afraid to speak.”¹⁰ In Adams’s view, the people themselves had successfully rebuffed England’s repressive legislation. Like the


reformers who held their seats in the Long Parliament, his allegiance to the monarchy at this early stage of rebellion was unwavering. In New England as in Old England, the march to revolution began with attacks against Crown officials and ministers. The printing press, in turn, transmitted and amplified those denunciations.

We cannot know if John Adams was reflecting on the events of the previous summer when he opened the volume Angier had placed in his hands. Indeed, historians will never know how intensively Adams read the volume or even if he read it at all. Like most reading experiences, Adams’s encounter remains indefinite and elusive. As Roger Chartier has noted, reading is an ephemeral practice “that only rarely leaves traces, that is scattered in an infinity of singular acts.” Adams’s diary entry represents the sole evidence of that singular experience. Since we cannot gain direct access to his reaction to the pamphlets, we must approach his interest in them from a different angle if we are to draw significance from his intriguing diary entry.

Recent developments in the field of book history have led scholars to rethink the nature of intellectual influence. Rather than presenting the history of thought—in our present case, political thought—as the linear transference of ideas from one person or location to another, historians have emphasized how printed texts have helped to forge networks of authors, publishers, and readers and how those texts have created webs of meaning through time and space for all those involved in their production, reproduction, dissemination, and reception. Consequently, historians of the book have pushed beyond tracing the genealogy of ideas and of texts and, instead, have begun to map out their diffusion and appropriation in various contexts. In doing so, they have developed a nonlinear model of intellectual influence that stresses circulation, context, and intertextuality over direct transmission.


12 For good explanations of this contextual approach to intellectual history, see Tony Davies, “Borrowed Language: Milton, Jefferson, and Mirabeau,” in *Milton and...*
Within the context of Adams’s evolving political and historical thought of the mid-1760s, the English revolutionary pamphlets are a reminder of the puritan origins of resistance to imperial governance. Though Adams rejected Calvinist theology in favor of the enlightened, cosmopolitan rationalism of the late eighteenth century, puritanism nonetheless helped shape his understanding of history and politics. During the Stamp Act crisis, in particular, as we will see in more detail later, he connected contemporary politics with the English Revolution, presented Anglo-American history as a gradual unfolding of the conditions and institutions that fostered liberty, expressed veneration for his puritan ancestors, and denounced the king’s ministers and bishops in correspondence and in print. The seventeenth-century pamphlets whose titles Adams inscribed in his diary engaged those very themes.

The majority of inhabitants in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, including John Adams and Oaks Angier, descended from the colony’s puritan founders. Adams always remembered that his ancestors had fled England during the reign of Charles I to seek sanctuary from the corruptions of the mother country. In the New World, they set out to build a godly commonwealth and found a reformed church. That experiment was intended to establish “a city upon a hill,” in John Winthrop’s famous words, a model that would demonstrate to the Old World the efficacy of religious and political reform. Having experienced

persecution under the early Stuarts, the puritans were wary of arbitrary government. Despite the tremendous social and economic changes that took place in New England in its first one and a half centuries, that fear persisted well into the eighteenth century and surfaced once again as the colonists resisted the incursions of British imperialism.\(^\text{13}\)

Two of John Adams’s works published in the midst of the upheaval reveal his engagement with seventeenth-century English history: “A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law” and his “Clarendon” newspaper essays. A series of four letters published anonymously in the *Boston Gazette* from August to October 1765, the “Dissertation” presented puritanism as a political force. A polemical history, it placed opposition to the stamp tax within the context of the founding of Massachusetts Bay. Adams depicted the Anglo-American past as a struggle between liberty and tyranny; knowledge and ignorance. The most egregious form of tyranny to date had been “the wicked confederacy” between the canon law and the feudal law. The canon law, in Adams’s opinion, amounted to a spiritual despotism invented “by the Romish clergy for the aggrandizement of their own order,” while the feudal law established a temporal tyranny designed to hold “the common people . . . in a state of servile dependence on their lords.” Together, the two legal frameworks constricted the rights of the people, reducing them “to a blind, implicit obedience” to their superiors.\(^\text{14}\)

In the course of the Protestant Reformation, Englishmen regained a sense of their ancient rights. As the “wicked

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confederacy” between church and state persisted, the common people resolved to overthrow it, a movement that culminated in two related historical events in the mid–seventeenth century: the revolution against the Stuart dynasty and the Great Migration to Massachusetts Bay. Those intertwined developments, Adams believed, were initiated by the puritans. “Under the excruciable race of the Steurarts,” the conflict between the people and the confederacy “became formidable, violent, and bloody.” “This great struggle peopled America,” Adams asserted, adding that “it was not religion alone . . . but a love of universal Liberty . . . that . . . Accomplished the settlement of America.” The puritans “had been so vexed, and tortured by the powers of those days” that “they . . . resolved to fly to the wilderness for refuge, from the temporal and spiritual principalities and powers, and scourges, of their native country.”

Thus, in Adams’s view, puritanism was a political as well as a spiritual force in the colonization of New England.

Indeed, Adams’s “Dissertation” positioned the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in “direct opposition to [both] the cannon [sic] and feudal systems” the early Stuarts had revived. On the reign of James I and Charles I, he remarked, “Every body knows how dangerous it was to speak or write in favour of any thing in those days but the triumphant system of religion and politics.” “Our fathers,” he continued, “were particularly the objects of the persecutions and proscriptions of the times.” On the settlement of Massachusetts, he wrote: “It was a resolution formed by a sensible people,—I mean the Puritans—almost in despair.” His ancestors “had become intelligent in general and many of them [more] learned” than the Anglican clergy. Consequently, the English government persecuted the puritans for their “knowledge and their freedom of inquiry and examination.”

In January 1766, Adams published three more editorials in the Boston Gazette. He signed them “Clarendon,” after Edward Hyde, the parliamentary leader turned royalist courtier

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and historian. Given that the Earl of Clarendon authored *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England Begun in the Year 1641*, a royalist account of the conflict, Adams’s choice of pseudonym might seem odd. However, Hyde had participated in the parliamentary opposition of the early 1640s, and his *History* acknowledged that civil war was the consequence, in part, of bad policies enforced by Charles I. In his “Dissertation,” Adams had praised Clarendon’s “political knowledge”; in fact, he regarded the earl as one of his generation’s “consummate statesmen.”

Later, in 1794, Adams’s son Thomas read Clarendon to gain historical perspective on the French republic, and father and son accordingly spent several evenings discussing the characters of “Hampden and Faulkland, Charles and Oliver Essex and Rupert.” Throughout his life, then, Adams turned to Clarendon’s writings on the English Revolution for insight into contemporary politics.

Adams composed his editorials in response to an exchange between “Pym” and “Hampden” that was appearing in the press on both sides of the Atlantic. A London newspaper had run several editorials by “Pym,” a pseudonym the author had intended to refer to John Pym, the opposition leader in the Long Parliament, but had mistakenly rendered as William Pym. In any case, Pym’s editorials blasted colonial arguments that the stamp tax was unconstitutional. In Boston, Massachusetts lawyer James Otis Jr.—adopting the pseudonym “Hampden”—defended the colonists in eight letters published in the *Boston Gazette*. “Hampden” referred to the parliamentarian John Hampden, who had opposed ship money during the reign of Charles I. Traditionally, ship money was a property tax occasioned by the British to pay for their naval protection during wartime. However, during his “Personal Rule,” Charles I levied the tax on inland towns during peacetime, which provoked numerous protests. Hampden refused to pay the tax, was put on trial, and found guilty. Consequently, he became a

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popular patriot hero in Anglo-America, a symbol of resistance to unconstitutional taxation.\textsuperscript{19}

Given his robust interest in seventeenth-century English history, Adams could not resist entering the fray to support Hampden’s case. As “Clarendon,” he informed Pym: “You and I have changed sides.” These changes, he contended, were easier to understand in himself (Clarendon) because “his education was in the law.” In Adams’s historical imagination, Clarendon, whose reputation as a defender of British constitutionalism Adams sought to redeem, had admitted that he had “suffered [himself] to be blindly attached to the king and some of his spiritual and temporal minions, particularly Laud and Strafford . . . against [his] principles in religion and government.” Archbishop Laud and the Earl of Strafford, two close advisers to Charles I, had corrupted Clarendon and “wrought into” him an excessive “reverence for kingly and priestly power.” Speaking from beyond the grave, Adams’s Clarendon now repented: “Since my Departure from the Earth, I have revolved these Things so often and seen my Errors so clearly that were I to write an History of your [Pym’s] Opposition now, I should not entitle it a Rebellion; nay, I should scarcely call the Protectorate of Cromwell an Usurpation.”\textsuperscript{20} Happily bending history to his own rhetorical ends, Adams delighted in revising Clarendon’s depiction of the English Civil War as a rebellion.

Comparing the puritan and parliamentary struggles “against the star chamber, and high commission” with the colonial protests against “the newly formed courts of admiralty in America,” Adams’s Clarendon denounced Pym for his inconsistency in supporting the former remonstrations while opposing the latter. Adams also compared the struggle “against ship-money, and the other projects of [the] disgraceful reign” of Charles I

\textsuperscript{19}For the best discussion of pseudonyms during the Revolutionary era, see Eran Shalev, \textit{Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp. 151–87.

\textsuperscript{20}John Adams, “The Earl of Clarendon to William Pym (January 20, 1766),” in \textit{Papers of John Adams}, 1:161–62. Previously, Jonathan Mayhew had also argued that “Cromwell and his adherents were not, properly speaking, guilty of rebellions because he whom they beheaded was not, properly speaking, their king; but a lawless tyrant” (quoted in McConville, \textit{The King’s Three Faces}, p. 99).
to the present battle in the colonies against unrepresentative taxation. In an early draft of the letter, Adams had added that those imperial taxation schemes simply recalled “King Charles I’s grievous and illegal Measures.” They threatened to resurrect the tyrannical schemes of “his two oppressive Instruments Laud and Strafford.” Adams could not have been clearer: Massachusetts’ imperial crisis bore striking similarities to the onset of the English Revolution.

The lawyer from Braintree, Massachusetts, had thought deeply and written knowledgeably about seventeenth-century historical precedents well before he encountered the printed volume that Angier placed before him. We can only imagine his excitement when he opened it and discovered how systematically its pamphlets, issue by issue, excavated the historical foundations of Massachusetts’ opposition to tyranny.

Long Parliament reformers, in part fearing a charge of treason, were slow to criticize their king. Ministers and bishops thus became the scapegoats for royal policy, and parliamentarians aimed to impeach them. The precept of English law that all justice proceeded from the king guided opposition rhetoric at the time, as the English people looked to Charles I to redress their grievances and restore harmony to the commonwealth. The dynamics of that rhetoric were evident in the volume Angier gave to Adams.

John Pym, the manager of the opposition in the House of Commons, was the architect of its strategy. In one speech, he described the relationship between the people and the king as “one Body” in which “the inferiour parts conferre nourishment and strength, the superiour sence and motion.” He warned that “if there bee an interruption of this necessary intercourse of blood and spirits, the whole Bodie must needs bee subject to decay and distemper.” Pym proceeded to accuse the

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king’s ministers of disrupting the natural relationship between the monarch and his subjects. His solution: “obstructions are first to be removed before Restoratives can be applied.”

The kingdom’s ills could be cured only if the king’s advisers were removed from power and replaced with men amenable to Parliament and the people.

References to the ailing body politic abounded in opposition discourse. In the pamphlets Adams encountered, parliam-


tarian Benjamin Rudyerd elaborated on these “diseases of the State.” He accused royal advisers of ringing “a dolefull, deadly knell over the whole Kingdome.” He was “zealous of a thorow Reformation” that “may be done with . . . as much moderation as the publique safety of the King and Kingdome can possibly admit.”

Even while attacking ministers, Lord Faulkland professed that the king’s “piety is knowne to give that Excellent Prerogative to his person, and The Law gives to his place, not to be able to do wrong.”

Stressing this assumption of royal infallibility, Lord George Digby declared that “Princes have no part in the ill of those actions which their Judges assure them to be Just, their Counsellors that they are Prudent, and their Divines that they are Conscientious.” The reformers’ real enemies were the king’s “pernitious Counsellors” and his “disconscient Divines” whose “wicked practices [have] provoked aspersions upon the government of the gratiousest and best of Kings.” As Digby acknowledged, such a focused rhetorical strategy allowed parliamentarians to “speak boldly of the abuse of his power by ill Ministers without reflexion upon his [the king’s] person.”

By targeting ministers for impeachment, the opposition nonetheless infringed on the royal prerogative that traditionally left a monarch free to choose his or her own advisers.

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23 The Speeches of Benjamin Rudyerd (London, 1641), pp. 6, 10.
24 The Speech or Declaration of the Lord Faulkland . . . against the Lord Finch (London, 1641), pp. 3–4.
The volume Angier had inherited from his uncle detailed the articles of impeachment against three ministers—the Earl of Strafford; Sir Francis Windebank, secretary of state; and the Lord Keeper John Finch. Finch and Windebank fled to the Continent to escape prosecution, but Strafford appeared before Parliament to face the charges against him. In 1631, Charles I had appointed Thomas Wentworth the Lord Deputy of Ireland. Two years later, he arrived in Dublin and, according to his critics, proceeded to rule England's first colony in an arbitrary manner. Many English people came to fear that Ireland was a testing ground for this new model of government, which would eventually be transferred to England. After the outbreak of war in Scotland, the king brought Wentworth back to England, elevated him to an earldom, and relied on his advice in dealing with Parliament. Strafford planned to charge the parliamentarians with treason, but Parliament seized the initiative by impeaching him first. Leading the attack on the earl, Pym accused him of being the chief “Author” of all the offenses in the Irish and English kingdoms; the other ministers had functioned merely as his “subordinate Actor[s].” The public drama of Strafford’s trial and execution particularized Parliament’s assault on the royal prerogative. Indeed, as the trial played out in early 1641, Strafford appeared to be the understudy on stage, with the main actor, Charles I, still safely in the wings.

26 Mr. Maynards Speech Before Both Houses in Parliament (London, 1641); Two Speeches Made by John Pym . . . the one after the Articles of the Charge against the Earle of Strafford were read. The other after the articles of the charge against Sir George Ratcliffe were read (London, 1641); A Speech made before the Lords . . . by Francis Rous . . . against Dr. Cossens, Dr. Maynwaring, and Dr. Beale (London, 1641); The Speech or Declaration of the Lord Faulkland . . . Against the Lord Finch (London, 1641). For the specific charges, see Depositions and Articles against Thomas Earle of Strafford Febr 19, 1640 (London, 1640); The Articles or Charge exhibited in Parliament against Sir Francis Windebanck, Secretary of State to his Majesty (London, 1641); The Accusation and Impeachment of John Lord Finch (London, 1640). For Finch’s defense, see The Lord Finch His Speech in the House of Commons (London, 1641).

27 Two Speeches . . . by John Pym, p. 7.

The first article of impeachment against Strafford was remarkably broad; it charged him with “traitorously endeavour[ing] to subvert the fundamentall Lawes and government of the Realmes of England and Ireland, and instead thereof to introduce an arbitrary and tyrannical Government against Law.” Allegedly, the Lord Deputy had committed this high treason “by giving his Majesty advice” to “by force of Armes . . . compell loyall subjects to submit thereunto.” Strafford’s crimes in Ireland, his accusers claimed, presaged the military government that was in store for England. As Lord Faulkland asserted, “hee was practicing upon another Kingdome, that manner of government which hee intended to settle in this, where hee committed so many, so mighty, and so manifest enormities and oppressions as the like have not beene committed by any Governour in any government since Verres [the governor of Sicily, whom Cicero had prosecuted before the Roman Senate].”

According to the opposition, Strafford’s name should be appended to a long list of oppressive executives who had preyed upon the people, coercing compliance by means of the armies under their control.

The eighth article of impeachment stated that Strafford had committed his crimes while serving as lieutenant general of the army in Ireland. The parliamentarians suspected that Strafford had been plotting to reduce “England by the Irish Army,” which was composed of “Papists,” the “Enemies of [England’s] Religion.” If the earl’s treason had succeeded, Pym declared, emphasizing the political as well as the spiritual

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29 Depositions and Articles, pp. 1–2. Likewise, Lord Finch was accused of “wickedly endeavour[ing] to subvert the fundamentall Lawes, and established government of the Realm of England, and instead thereof to introduce an arbitrary tyrannical government against Law” (Accusation and Impeachment of John Lord Finch, p. 1). The accusations against Secretary Windebank largely focused on his alleged toleration of Roman Catholics (Articles or charge . . . against Sir Francis Windebanck).


31 Depositions and Articles, p. 4.

32 Two Speeches . . . by John Pym, p. 7; Mr. Maynards Speech, p. 9.
dimensions of English anti-popery, “our soules had been
inthralled to the spiritual Tyranny of Satan; our Consciences to
the Ecclesiastical Tyranny of the Pope; our Lives, our Persons
and Estates, to the Civill Tyranny of an arbitrary, unlimited,
confused Government.”

The third article charged Strafford with personally profiting
from revenues collected in Ireland: “That the better to inrich
and enable himselfe to goe through with his traitorous designes,
hee hath detained a great part of his Majesties revenue, without
giving legall account; and hath taken great summes out of the
Exchequer, converting them to his owne use.” As the “Grand
Apostate to the Common-wealth,” Strafford had brought the
monarchy “almost to the brink of destruction.” The opposition
contended that the king’s ministers served neither Crown
nor commonwealth; they “are Men that talke largely of the
Kings service,” Rudyerd complained, but “have done none but
their own.” Furthermore, “they have exhausted the Kings reve-
new” by spending “vast summes of money wastfully, fruitlessly,
dangerously.”

The parliamentary opposition was incensed not only with the
ministers’ profligacy but with the extension of the royal pre-
rogative beyond the boundaries defined by the common law.
Accosting the ministers for unlawfully raising levies and billet-
ing soldiers, the Earl of Bristol insisted that those “Projectors”
“have extended the Prerogative of the King beyond the lim-
its, which mars that sweete harmony.” The Earl of Strafford
similarly “hath encroached jurisdiction, where none was, taking
upon him a power to repell the lawes, and to make new lawes,
and in domineering over the lives and goods, and what ever
else was the subjects.” John Maynard asserted. By disrupting
the balance between royal authority and the liberties of En-

33Two Speeches . . . by John Pym, p. 2.
34Depositions and Articles, p. 2.
35The Speeches of Lord Digby, p. 19.
36The Speeches of Benjamin Rudyerd, pp. 6, 7.
37Speeches and Passages, p. 143.
but the Scepter of Justice out of the Kings hand.”

Similarly, Pym grumbled that “The Law of this Kingdome makes the King to bee the fountaine of Justice,” but Strafford “would make him the fountaine of Injustice, of confusion, of publique misery and Calamitie.”

As long as the parliamentarians trusted that the king would listen and respond to their protests of ministerial abuse, they proclaimed his virtues. In a speech lamenting that a depressed trade was having a negative effect on the commonwealth, Sir Thomas Roe testified to the king’s essential benevolence: “wee must flye to the Sanctuary of his Majesties gracious goodness and protection, who I am confident, when the whole business shall be prepared for him, and that we have shewed him our duty and love . . . I am confident, I say, that he will vouch-safe you all favour fit to be conferred upon good Subjects.”

Rudyerd agreed that Parliament must work with the king to reform church and state. Reformers were “not to seek [their] own good, but in Him [the king] and with Him.” If they failed to cooperate with their monarch, they would have “commit[ed] the same crime ourselves, which we must condemn in others.”

Swearing allegiance to their sovereign, the parliamentarians nonetheless sought to regulate his powers by means of the common law. “The Lawes of this Kingdome,” Pym explained, “have invested the Royall Crowne with Power sufficient for the manifestation of his goodnesse.” Any attempt to enlarge the royal prerogative would diminish the kingdom: “if more [power] bee required, it is like to have no other effects but povertie, weaknesse, and miserie, whereof of late we have had very wofull experience.” Pym well understood that the king’s authority and the subjects’ rights were inextricably linked, “that [the people’s] owne Libertie and Peace are preserved and secured by his Prerogative, and they will always be ready to support and supply his Majestie with their lives and fortunes for the maintenance

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38 Mr. Maynard’s Speech, p. 4.
39 Two Speeches . . . by John Pym, p. 3.
41 The Speeches of Benjamin Rudger, p. 5.
of his just and lawful power.”42 In short, the parliamentarians of the early 1640s did not propose to overturn the monarchy; they aimed, rather, to restore balance to the government.

During their own imperial crisis, American colonists deployed rhetoric remarkably similar to that of the parliamentary opposition in the early English Revolution. In particular, the Sons of Liberty, the extra-legal association that organized protests throughout the colonies, professed their loyalty to George III while denouncing his ministers and agents. Emerging from the original Loyal Nine, the Boston Sons of Liberty proclaimed themselves the heirs of seventeenth-century advocates of freedom. In the 1760s, as in the early 1640s, the monarch’s authority and good intentions were not disputed. Only gradually, as the king deliberately ignored their urgent petitions, did the colonists begin to blame their monarch for the crisis in which they were embroiled.43 John Adams did not deviate from this common pattern.

When George III assumed the throne, Adams praised his avowed patronage of “Religion, Virtue, the british Name and Constitution, in Church and state, the subjects Rights, Liberty, Commerce, [and] military Merit.” “These are sentiments worthy of a King—a Patriot King.” Adams announced. He trusted that George III would rule Great Britain and its colonies for the public good and become the ideal monarch that Viscount Bolingbroke had depicted in his The Idea of a Patriot King. Within a few years of the monarch’s accession, however, Parliament began imposing new taxes and regulations on the colonies. At that time, Adams and other patriots held colonial officers, ministers,

42 Two Speeches . . . by John Pym, p. 4.
43 On colonial petitions’ customary language of deference and allegiance, see Richard L. Bushman, King and People in Provincial Massachusetts (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 46–54. For the gradual intensification of rhetoric aimed first at denouncing colonial agents and ministers, then Parliament, and finally the king, see Pauline Maier, From Resistance to Revolution.
and parliamentarians, not the new king, accountable for those misdeeds.44

When they dispatched their legislative representatives to Boston, Massachusetts towns armed them with instructions outlining the community consensus on important matters. In 1765, Adams composed the town of Braintree’s instructions, which advised the town’s representative that the stamp tax was “burthensome” and “unconstitutional”; still, the document was prefaced with the customary declaration of loyalty to the king and royal government. Forty towns subsequently subscribed to Adams’s influential statement, which placed responsibility for the stamp tax on “many of the measures of the late ministry, and Some of the late Acts of Parliament.” Those policies “have a tendency . . . to divest us of our most Essential Rights and Liberties,” Adams asserted. Although over 130 years had passed since the founding of Massachusetts, Adams argued that such unconstitutional taxes threatened to strip the wealth of this “infant, Sparsely Settled Country,” which, given its provincial status, was vulnerable to economic and political devastation. In an early draft of the instructions, Adams had claimed that colonists should regard themselves as “guilty of great Impiety to the Memory of our Fore-fathers” if they submitted to these oppressive measures. The proper course of action, as it had been in 1640, was to appeal to their sovereign.45

The difficulty however, as Adams asserted in the early 1770s, was that Thomas Hutchinson, the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, was interfering with colonists’ fundamental right to petition their king. By disallowing grants to colonial agents, he afforded the colonists “no Prospect of Peace and Harmony” because they had “no possible Way of conveying their Complaints or sentiments to the Royal Ear.” The king’s capacity to reform ministerial abuses depended upon the information he received directly from his subjects. But due to Hutchinson’s machinations, Adams lamented, currently “we can have


no Man to present a Petition, or Complaint to the Throne, but one whom the Governor or Minister shall approve.”

“Even in the Reign of a wise and good King,” Adams reflected, a “few abandoned Villains,” ministers like Strafford and governors like Hutchinson, who were motivated by “Lust of Gain and Power,” trampled on the rights of “worthy People.” In a letter to his wife Abigail, Adams elaborated on his public condemnation. “Hutchinson, Oliver, and others of their Circle, who for their own Ends of Ambition and Avarice, have procured, promoted, encouraged, counsilled, aided, and abetted the Taxation of America,” he maintained, “have been the Real Tempters of their Countrymen and Women, into all the Vices, sins, crimes and follies which that Taxation has occasioned.”

During both the English and American Revolutions, the opposition worried that corrupt authorities would seek to establish and secure arbitrary government by turning an army against the people. In the early 1640s, these fears centered not on a domestic army—Oliver Cromwell’s New Model Army was not formed until 1645—but on the prospect of an Irish, Roman Catholic army being deployed against Protestant subjects in England and Scotland. Strafford had raised an army in Ireland and planned to bring troops to England until the crisis with Parliament was settled. Many parliamentarians interpreted this development as an attempt to intimidate them into silence.

Though this anti-army ideology changed and developed in response to subsequent historical events over the next century and a half, British colonists essentially inherited this intense fear of professional, permanent, and centralized armies. In his “Dissertation,” Adams emphasized that the feudal law was, “originally, a code of laws for a vast army, in a perpetual encampment,” an undesirable situation that created political


relationships based on hierarchy, dependence, and servility.⁴⁸ Therefore, the British regiments that remained in North America after the Seven Years War contradicted British constitutional principles. Given its victory at Louisburg, the army was no longer needed to defend the colonies against the French Catholic menace. Now, it served only to suppress colonial opposition. Just as Strafford’s Irish troops offered Charles I a way to enforce Stuart absolutism at home, the further deployment of two royal and Irish regiments in Boston in June 1768 signaled to the colonists the ministry’s coercive intentions.⁴⁹

Even as late as 1775, Adams confined his public criticism of the government to the colonial officers who were misusing the powers entrusted to them by the Crown. In his “Novanglus” essays, published early that year, he denounced the “famous triumvirate” of former Governor Francis Bernard, Chief Justice and, later, Governor Thomas Hutchinson, and Lieutenant Governor Andrew Oliver as “the junto” who “had by degrees, and before the people were aware of it, erected a tyranny in the province.” By appointing themselves, their relations, and their friends to key government posts, these three men possessed and exercised inordinate power in Massachusetts, claimed critics like Adams. This junto “had the legislative and executive in their control, and more natural influence over the judicial than is ever to be trusted to any set of men in the world.” By holding multiple offices that, in effect, blurred the separation of powers in the colonies, Bernard, Hutchinson, and Oliver violated the British constitutional ideal of mixed government. Their monopolization of public offices was creating a provincial aristocracy that contradicted the principles of the puritan


founders of Massachusetts Bay. Indeed, these men had already used their powers to “promote submission to the Stamp Act, and to discountenance resistance to it.”

In language that recalled Benjamin Rudyerd’s accusations against Strafford, Adams denounced Bernard, Hutchinson, and Oliver’s “designs of obtaining a revenue, to divide among themselves,” thereby ignoring the public good. The taxes collected in the colonies were not intended for the English exchequer, “to be spent there in discharging the national debt, and lessening the burdens of the poor people.” The three imperial officials had more “selfish” motives: they planned to finance their own salaries directly from the revenue, bypassing the people’s right, through their legislatures, to vote on officials’ pay. This practice had customarily ensured that public officers, obliged to the people for their support, were bound by the people’s will. These taxation schemes, Adams charged, would ultimately destroy the constitutional framework of Massachusetts by “sweep[ing] away all the charters upon the continent, with the destroying besom of an act of parliament, and reduce all the governments to the plan of the royal governments, with a nobility in each colony, not hereditary indeed, at first, but for life.”

Despite his worries about the imposition of a colonial aristocracy, Adams still had no quarrel with his monarch. “I have not such an horror of republican spirit, which is a spirit of true virtue, and honest independence, I do not mean on the king, but on men in power.” He went on, “This [republican] spirit is so far from being incompatible with the British constitution, that it is the greatest glory of it, and the nation has always been most prosperous, when it has most prevailed and been most encouraged by the crown.” Indeed, the republican spirit that Adams lauded was not in opposition to but depended upon royal authority: “I wish [the crown] increased in every part of the world, especially in America,” he insisted; “and I think the measures, the tories are now pursuing will increase it to a

degree that will ensure us, in the end, redress of grievances and an happy reconciliation with Great Britain.”  

Because Adams and other colonists looked to George III to solve their imperial crisis, they, like their parliamentary predecessors, were sorely disillusioned when the king failed to heed their petitions.

During the early stages of the English and American Revolutions, the opposition denounced not only the king’s ministers but also the bishops and archbishops of the Anglican Church. The Long Parliament encompassed a range of attitudes toward episcopacy, with some members calling for the abolition of the institution and others calling for moderate reforms. Most parliamentarians agreed, however, that church government had grown corrupt and that some degree of intervention was required. This much is obvious in the volume Adams encountered. “We are here Assembled to doe Gods businesse and the Kings, in which our own is included,” announced Benjamin Rudyerd at the opening session of Parliament in 1640. “Let us first feare God, then shall wee honour the King the more.”

In placing God above the king, Rudyerd’s statement accorded with a theory of resistance advanced by many puritans beginning in the late sixteenth century. Familiar in the 1640s and in the 1760s, these theories asserted that spiritual authority trumped temporal authority. Within that framework, rebellion against an earthly power was justified if the magistrate had established

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52 Adams, “Novanglus,” p. 278.
54 Criticisms of church government and attacks against individual bishops appeared in at least nine of the volume’s pamphlets: The Third Speech of The Lord George Digby; The Speeches of Benjamin Rudyerd, pp. 16–17; The First and Large Petition of the Citie of London; Mr. Bagshaw’s Speech in Parliament; Four Speeches Made by S. Edward Deering; A Speech of the Honorable Nathanael Fiennes; Mr. Grymstons Speech in Parliament; A Speech made to the House . . . by the Lord Viscount Faulkeiland; A Speech made before the Lords . . . by Francis Rous.
55 The Speeches of Benjamin Rudyerd, p. 1.
laws contrary to God’s rules, as read through the Protestant Reformation.

Accordingly, parliamentarians brought forth a long list of infractions to demonstrate the degree to which royal policies had deviated from divine law. “Religion hath bin for a long time, and still is the great designe upon this Kindome,” warned Rudyerd. “It is a knowne and practis’d principle,” he added, “that they who would introduce another Religion into the Church, must first trouble and disorder the Government of the State.”

Rudyerd was referring to the Arminian innovations that Archbishop Laud and his supporters introduced into the English church during the 1630s. To its puritan critics, Arminianism represented a return to Rome—justification by works rather than by faith, ceremony and ritual rather than sacred scripture, and a powerful ecclesiastical hierarchy rather than congregational autonomy. Such popish incursions had repercussions in the political realm since religious and political authority were entangled in England’s state church. Indeed, Stuart absolutism rested on James I’s precept: “No Bishops; No King.” The monarch ruled the Church of England through the bishops and archbishops that he appointed. They, in turn, were obliged to uphold monarchy. However, in the eyes of the puritans, episcopal government undermined reformed religion by bringing the English church dangerously close to Rome.

One of the more significant documents in the 1641 volume Adams abstracted was a petition against episcopacy subsequently referred to as the “Root and Branch” petition. Carried to Westminster by a crowd of 1,500 on 11 December 1640, it had allegedly been signed by 15,000 Londoners, who appealed to the House of Commons to abolish episcopal government: “that the said [ecclesiastical] government with all its dependances, rootes and branches may be abolished, and all lawes in their behalfe made voyd, and the government, according to Gods word, may be rightly placed among us.” The petition went on to assert that the bishops’ actions have “proved prejudiciall and very dangerous both to the Church and the

56 The Speeches of Benjamin Rudyerd, p. 4.
Grievances included constraints placed on individual ministers and their preaching, the censoring of godly books, the introduction of Roman Catholic practices and images into the church, and the inherently “popish” nature of an ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the supplicants’ estimation, the episcopal government of the 1630s was despotic, for it infringed upon each individual’s conscience.

The bishops’ practices had been “Derogatory to his Majestie and his State Royall,” petitioners insisted. Some parliamentarians, such as Edward Deering, accused the prelates of attempting to place “the Mitre above the Crowne.” Because “Episcopacy is inseparable to the Crowne of England,” Bagshaw wrote, repeating the common refrain, “it is commonly now said, no Bishop, no King; no Miter, no Scepter.” He, however, disputed the necessity of this relation, arguing that “it is plaine and apparent, that the Kings of England were long before Bishops, and have a subsistence without them, and have done and may still depose them.” Stressing that the bishops derived their powers from the monarch and not vice versa, Bagshaw’s rhetorical strategy effectively allowed the opposition to profess their loyalty to the monarch while attacking the very instruments of his ecclesiastical authority.

Many parliamentarians reserved their strongest invectives for Archbishop Laud. Employing metaphors of disease and contagion, Harbottle Grimston called him “the stye of all Pestilent filth, that hath infected the State, and Government of the Church and Common-wealth.” Grimston denounced Strafford and Windebank as mere instruments of Laud, that “Broker and Pander to the Whore of Babylon,” and he urged the Commons “to strike whilst the Iron is hot,” go to the Lords, and accuse the archbishop of high treason. The safety of the kingdom was at stake. “Such a Viper” should not be permitted “neere his Majesties person, to distill his poysion into his Sacred ears.”

57 The First and Large Petition of the Citie of London . . . For a Reformation in Church-government as also for the abolishment of episcopacie (London, 1641), pp. 1–2.
58 Four Speeches Made by S. Edward Deering, p. 7.
59 Mr. Bagshaw’s Speech in Parliament, p. 3.
60 Mr. Grymstons Speech in Parliament, pp. 2, 5.
The godly, especially, had suffered under Laud’s regime. “The zeale of [the] Bishops have beene to eate up and persecute the Church,” Grimston charged.61 Supporting Grimston’s claim, Deering presented the petition of “a poore distresed Minister” from Kent whom Laud had prevented from preaching. Described as “a man conformable in his practice, orthodoxe in his Doctrine, laborious in his Ministery as any wee have or I doe know,” the clergyman had suffered because he fell “under the generall oblique of a Puritan.”62 Referring to “the late daies of Persecution,” Rous recalled the case of the “proto-martyr” Dr. Peter Smart. An “Army of Priests” had preyed upon him. The ecclesiastical hierarchy had “beate him downe,” Rous be-moaned, “yea they pull him up by the rootes, taking away all his meanes of maintenance and living.” “There is no crueltie to Priestly crueltie,” Rous reflected, reminding his readers that it was priests who “did put our very Saviour to death.”63

The parliamentarians duly noted that such maltreatment had compelled many godly souls to leave England. Benjamin Rudyerd, who had helped organize colonial enterprises like the Providence Company during the 1630s, acknowledged that “a great multitude of the Kings Subjects, striving to hold commu-nion with us; but seeing how farre we were gone, and fearing how much further we would goe, were forc’d to flee the Land, some into other inhabited Countries, very many into Savage Wilderness, because the Land would not beare them.”64 Digby similarly grieved that “men of the best Conscience” were “ready to fly into the wildernesse for Religion.”65 Likewise Nathaniel Fiennes blamed the popish-style ceremonies now pervasive in the English church for “depriv[ing] us of so many thousand Christians which desired . . . to hold communion with us.” He

61Mr. Grymstons Speech in Parliament, p. 3.
63A Speech made before the Lords . . . by Francis Rous, pp. 2, 5.
64The Speeches of Benjamin Rudyer, p. 4. On some opposition parliamentarians’ involvement in colonial ventures in the early 1640s, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Providence Island, 1630–1641: The Other Puritan Colony (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
65The Speeches of Lord Digby, p. 15.
added, “I say what hath deprived us of them, and scattered them into I know not what places and corners of the world, but these indifferent ceremonies?” Scion of a founding family of Connecticut, Fiennes knew very well, of course, where the godly had fled.

The memory of the puritans’ emigration was still alive in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, and it particularly enthralled John Adams. Two days after he listed the titles of the 1640s English revolutionary pamphlets in his diary, the Bay Colony held a thanksgiving day to commemorate the repeal of the Stamp Act. On 24 July 1766, Adams attended a ceremony at the First Congregational Church of Braintree. The story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 50:20 was the day’s biblical text: “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” In his sermon, Reverend Anthony Wibird related the passage to the founding of Massachusetts. Adams offered a précis in his diary: “America is Joseph, The King Lords and Commons—Joseph’s Father and Brothers. Our Forefathers sold into Egypt, i.e. Persecuted into America, &c.” This theme of persecution, evident in biblical and historical precedents, provided a useful framework within which Adams interpreted the imperial struggles of the mid-1760s.

The most vivid symbol of that persecution was the person of Archbishop Laud. With his keen interest in family history, Adams traced Laud’s treachery back to his own ancestors. In a letter to Benjamin Rush, Adams recalled that his great-grandfather had fled from Somersetshire in 1638, seeking refuge in Braintree: “Henry Adams a congregational Dissenter from the Church of England persecuted by the intollerant Spirit of Archbishop Laud, came over to this Country with

Eight Sons in the Reign of King Charles the first.”

In his diary entry about the pamphlet volume, Adams noted that Grimston called Archbishop Laud “the great and common enemy of all Goodness and good men.” Elisha Williams, the rector of Yale from 1726 to 1739, quoted that same passage in his *Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*, published in 1741. According to Williams, the persecutions suffered by the godly under “that tyrannical Prelate Laud, (said in Parliament by Sir Harbottle Grimstone, to be the great and common Enemy of all Goodness and good Men) are well known by all truly acquainted with the History of those Times.” That Williams and Adams were quoting the identical phrase from Grimston’s parliamentary speech is more than a curious coincidence; it demonstrates how deeply engrained the ill treatment of the puritans was among their descendants, even five or so generations out.

And just as church governance had preoccupied the parliamentarians of the early 1640s, ecclesiastical grievances shaped the colonists’ protests against British imperial authority. The “apprehension of Episcopacy contributed as much as any other cause to the American Revolution,” Adams claimed in 1815, because it captured “the attention not only of the inquiring mind, but also of the common people.” In a sermon at St. Mary-le-Bow in 1741, Thomas Secker, the bishop of Oxford, announced that he intended to establish an episcopate in North America. In his view, an ecclesiastical hierarchy would strengthen Anglicanism in the colonies. Bishops could ordain and regulate clergy and visit parishes to ensure that they complied with official practices and doctrines. Secker’s announcement horrified colonists, especially in New England. In the decades preceding

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the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, rumors that a “standing army of bishops” was set to invade New England dominated the press and pulpit.\textsuperscript{72} When an Anglican church was established at Cambridge, across the street from Harvard College, animosities toward the imperial administration intensified, for the act was seen as a direct challenge to the Congregational mission of that institution. Judging from the increasing number of Anglican missionaries and parishioners in the colonies, it appeared to the descendants of the puritans that the Church of England was now making inroads into sacred puritan territory.\textsuperscript{73}

In his revolutionary writings, Adams railed against episcopal tyranny. He stressed that the presence of bishops in Massachusetts was fundamentally incompatible with the commonwealth’s founding principles. This view he expressed most forcefully in his “Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law.” Committed to the principles of spiritual and political liberty, Massachusetts existed “in direct opposition to the cannon [sic] and feudal systems” that had enslaved Europe. In Adams’s idealized representation of Massachusetts’ origins, the first planters had accomplished the goal of the Root and Branch petition by “demolish[ing] the whole system of Diocesan episcopacy,” as “all reasonable and impartial men must do.” The founders, having eschewed the episcopacy, consecrated their clergy instead by “sacerdotal ordination, on the foundation of the bible and common sense.”\textsuperscript{74}

The imperial designs of the 1760s, however, threatened to stamp out the founders’ achievements. “There seems to be a direct and formal design on foot, to enslave all America” and to subvert “the whole system of our Fathers,” Adams warned his

\textsuperscript{72}Jonathan Mayhew, The Snare Broken: A Thanksgiving Discourse, Preached at the Desire of the West Church (Boston, 1766), p. 19.


readers. The imperial administration was waging a war against the colonists on two fronts. While the Stamp Act threatened “to introduce the inequalities and dependencies of the feudal system,” the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the missionary arm of the Anglican Church, was plotting to establish the canon law in America. In preparation for this new contest, Adams instructed, all colonists must “read and recollect and impress upon our souls, the views and ends, of our own more immediate forefathers, in exchanging their native country for a dreary, inhospitable wilderness.” He went on, “Let us examine into the nature of that power and the cruelty of that oppression, which drove them from their homes” and “recollect their amazing fortitude, their bitter sufferings!” The volume of parliamentary speeches and documents Adams encountered in 1766 would have given him an occasion to do just that.

At the end of 1765, the then thirty-year-old John Adams documented in his diary that the previous year had “been the most remarkable Year of my Life.” The passage of the Stamp Act had inspired a “Spirit” of resistance in the colonies “that will be recorded to our Honor, with all future Generations.” This political awakening pushed the colonists to become “more attentive to their Liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them, than they were ever before known or had occasion to be.” During the years leading up to the Revolution, Adams began to articulate his own interpretation of Anglo-American history, which stressed the progression toward civil and religious liberty in Massachusetts. The puritans were the heroes of that narrative.

Consequently, the volume of English revolutionary pamphlets that Adams encountered in 1766, as the colonists were celebrating the Stamp Act’s repeal, intrigued the lawyer from Braintree. Those pamphlets presented the opening drama of

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76 Adams, Diary and Autobiography, 1:263.
the English Revolution—key parliamentary speeches denouncing the king’s ministers, the articles of impeachment against three ministers, and the London petition for abolishing episcopacy. Popular publications, they denounced the king’s ministers and bishops, but they cautiously avoided any hint of treason by professing loyalty to the king. They also gave ample evidence of the war of words that preceded the outbreak of Civil War in August 1642. A similar rhetorical war began in the colonies in the mid-1760s, a war in which Adams played a key role.

During the Stamp Act crisis, drawing historical parallels became “a crucial mode of political reflection” for Adams, a way of comprehending the present struggle in the context of a past that possessed both personal and political significance for him.\textsuperscript{77} In Adams’s mind, two historical events—the English Revolution and the puritan migration—had coalesced into a cultural memory that resonated with him during the imperial crisis. But did that particular memory echo beyond Massachusetts and New England? Did the regionally inflected discussion of the puritan experience of tyranny translate into other colonial contexts? If so, what did the memory of the English Revolution come to mean in Quaker Pennsylvania, in cavalier Virginia, or in royalist Barbados? And, how did these diverse religious identities and political allegiances, rooted as they were in the seventeenth-century past, impinge on attempts to forge intercolonial cooperation in the late eighteenth century?

Thoroughly partisan as he was, even Adams understood that the country’s historical origins were not singular but plural.\textsuperscript{78} In 1818, when he attempted to explain to Hezekiah Niles the sentiments that had fueled the American Revolution, Adams proposed that “those [revolutionary] principles and feelings ought


\textsuperscript{78}Richard Beeman’s recent study of the diversity of eighteenth-century America emphasizes the unique traditions and experiences that shaped the politics of each colony. See The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
to be traced back for two hundred years, and sought in the history of the country from the first plantations in America.” He had a clear view of the planting of Massachusetts, yet he recognized that not all of the colonies shared in that particular experience. “The colonies had grown up under constitutions of government so different,” Adams remarked, and “their intercourse had been so rare and their knowledge of each other so imperfect that to unite them . . . was certainly a very difficult enterprise.” In time, the federation of colonies that had come together in opposition to tyranny became a full-fledged republic, but its diverse origins would continue to mold its character—even into the twenty-first century. Those origins linger in the nation’s cultural memory in no small part because their circumstances circulated in printed texts. Discussed, debated, recalled, and eventually rediscovered by a subsequent generation, those texts would help shape the future, their traces evident in the interpretations, writings, and actions of their successors.


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