

10-2017

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Sarah Morgan and Hall, Mark, "Whose Rebellion? Reformed Resistance Theory in America: Part I" (2017). *Faculty Publications - Department of History, Politics, and International Studies*. 85.
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Whose Rebellion? Reformed Resistance Theory in America: Part I

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. Yet virtually every political idea usually attributed to John Locke was alive and well among Reformed political thinkers decades before Locke wrote the *Second Treatise*. In this two-part essay, we trace just one element of the Reformed political tradition: the question of *who* may actively and justly resist a tyrant. We focus on the American experience but begin our discussion by considering the early Reformers.

Students of the American Founding routinely assert that America's civic leaders were influenced by secular Lockean ideas, especially on the question of resistance to tyrannical authority.¹ Even scholars who recognize that many Founders were people of faith frequently fail to recognize the significance of that faith

¹ See, for instance, Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (1922; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1942) and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955). More recent proponents of this position tend to make significantly more nuanced and careful arguments; see Michael P. Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996) and Jerome Huyler, *Locke in America:*

in shaping their political commitments. To give just one example by a scholar who takes religion seriously, John Fea, in his book *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, argues that Reformed ministers who supported the patriot side in America's war for independence (as virtually all of them did) were influenced by John Locke because the Bible does not sanction resisting tyrannical authority. He briefly considers the possibility that the Reformed political tradition might teach something different but rejects this idea because John Calvin "who had the most influence on the theology of the colonial clergy, taught that rebellion against civil government was never justified."² This claim in and of itself is disputable, as we discuss below, but more importantly, it ignores significant developments on the question of resistance among Reformed thinkers over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Virtually every political idea usually attributed to Locke was alive and well among Reformed political thinkers decades before Locke published the *Second Treatise* in 1689. These writers believed in natural rights, limited government, the importance of consent, and that tyrants should be actively resisted.³ In this two-part essay, we trace just one element of the Reformed political tradition: the question of *who* can actively resist a tyrant. It is striking that virtually no leading Calvinist leader of whom we are aware denies that tyrants can be forcefully resisted; the primary question is whether lesser magistrates must lead the resistance, or if the people or individuals

The Moral Philosophy of the Founding Era (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995). Because of strict page limitations, we keep our engagement with the secondary literature to an absolute minimum. We recognize that scholars have argued for other intellectual influences on America's founders. Alan Gibson provides a good overview of many of these schools, although he virtually ignores the possibility that America's Founders were influenced by Reformed political theology in *Interpreting the Founding: Guide to the Enduring Debates over the Origins and Foundations of the American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006). For a broader discussion of the Reformed political tradition, its influence in America, and the tradition's relationship to John Locke, see Mark David Hall, *Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 118–19, 231. Another scholar with more than a passing understanding of Reformed resistance theory who still gives virtually all credit to Locke for developing this concept is William T. Redding, "The American Revolution, Romans 13, and the Anglo Tradition of Reformed Protestant Resistance Theory," *American Political Thought* 5.3 (Summer 2016): 359–90, esp. 373, 378.

³ We are not the first to argue this idea, but it is still a minority position, especially among students of politics. See, for instance, Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

may do so. The focus of our two articles is on how this question has been answered by American political thinkers, particularly during the colonial and revolutionary period, but we begin by briefly sketching the development of this tradition in Europe.

1. The Development of a Tradition in Continental Europe

With a few notable exceptions,⁴ prior to the Protestant Reformation Christian thinkers taught that the Bible prohibited armed resistance to tyrannical governments. If a ruler ordered a citizen to disobey God, the citizen should refuse to obey—and take the consequences. Passive resistance was generally permitted, but active resistance, especially armed rebellion against a tyrannical ruler, was strictly prohibited. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other early Reformers initially embraced this view, although they eventually concluded that active resistance could be offered in some cases.

Some of these early Reformers sanctioned active resistance *only* by inferior magistrates. For instance, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), in his lectures on Romans 13, published in 1558, and commentary on Judges 3, published in 1561, makes it clear that inferior magistrates who are constitutionally empowered to do so may resist a tyrant “when it cannot otherwise be done.”⁵ But he is equally clear that those “which only are subject and counted altogether private, ought not to arise against their Princes and Lords.”⁶

Vermigli’s position is often attributed to John Calvin—indeed, it is difficult to read his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as arguing anything else—but Calvin’s positions developed over time. Space constraints prohibit us from examining every thinker we consider in this essay in detail, but because Calvin has been taken as *the* spokesman for the Reformed tradition, and because his views on these issues have been distorted by academics—particularly students of the American Founding—we consider them in some detail.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin makes it clear that private individuals are not to offer active resistance to even wicked tyrants. But he goes on to say that

if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings (as in ancient times the ephors were set against the Spartan kings, or the tribunes of the people against the Roman consuls, or the demarchs against the senate of the Athenians; and perhaps, as things now are, such power as the three estates exercise in every realm when they hold their chief assemblies), I am so far

⁴ See, for instance, John of Salisbury *Policraticus* (1159).

⁵ Robert M. Kingdon, ed., *The Political Thought of Peter Martyr Vermigli: Selected Texts and Commentary* (Geneva: Droz, 1980), 9–11, 99–100 (quote from page 100).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance. (4.20.31)⁷

This passage has been understood by most commentators as encouraging lesser magistrates to offer active resistance—including armed rebellion—against a monarch who becomes a tyrant.⁸

However, if one looks beyond the *Institutes*, particularly to texts penned after 1559, a good case can be made that Calvin expands his teaching on this subject to permit private citizens to actively resist tyrants. According to Calvin scholar Willem Nijenhuis, three events in 1559 caused Calvin to begin to reconsider his views:

After concluding with Spain the Peace of Câteau-Cambrésis on 3 April 1559, the King of France could deploy his military potential to combat the Huguenots. In May the Synod of Paris accepted the *Confession de Foy* and the discipline of the French Reformed Church. The death of Henry II on 10 July and the accession of the weak fifteen years-old Francis II exposed the court to the increasing influence of the Guises, and thereby to a further politicization of the Huguenots.⁹

These events seem to have encouraged Calvin to embrace a more radical approach to resisting tyrants. For instance, in a 1560 sermon on Melchizedek, Calvin contends that Abraham was a private person who received a “special vocation” to pick up the sword to save his people from ungodly rulers.¹⁰ A wave of violence against the Huguenots beginning in 1561 apparently inspired even further movement. In a 1562 sermon, he contended that all citizens—public and private alike—have an obligation to pursue justice and righteousness: “We should resist evil as much as we can. And this has been enjoined on all people in general; I tell you, this was said not only to princes, magistrates, and public prosecutors, but also to all private persons.”¹¹

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1519.

⁸ Some have asserted that Calvin is encouraging lesser magistrates to offer only legal or constitutional resistance, not armed rebellion. See, for instance, Gregg L. Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 83–84. Particularly in light of Calvin's other writings on this topic, we find this view to be unpersuasive.

⁹ Willem Nijenhuis, “The Limits of Civil Disobedience in Calvin's Last-Known Sermons: Development of His Ideas on the Right to Civil Resistance,” in *Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation*, vol. 2 (New York: Brill, 1994), 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

In his 1561 commentary on Daniel, Calvin writes,

For earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy than to obey them whenever they are so restive and wish to spoil God of his rights, and, as it were, to seize upon his throne and draw him down from heaven.¹²

Although in its immediate context this passage refers to those rulers who assert a right to be worshiped as if they were God himself, a broader reading could be that if the purpose of government is the good of mankind, then rulers who defy that purpose by their acts of tyranny and oppression are “ris[ing] up against God” as well. As such, they could be justly overthrown. Other parts of Calvin’s commentaries support this reading.

It is not necessary for the purposes of this essay to resolve definitively whether Calvin eventually embraced the view that private persons can actively resist tyrannical governments. We think there are very good reasons to believe he did, but even if he did not, it should be beyond dispute that Calvin did not embrace the doctrine of, as one political scientist puts it, “passive obedience and unconditional submission” to civic authorities.¹³ At a minimum, we find Calvin to not only sanction but encourage resistance by lesser magistrates. Moreover, the Reformed tradition does not begin and end with Calvin; other thinkers, confronted with tyranny as a political reality and not merely a theoretical problem, developed their own answers to the question.

Reformed thinkers are people of the Book, and so it would be nice to think their interpretation of the Bible is not influenced by contemporary events. On the other hand, specific problems may well force ministers and theologians to address particular issues or to rethink previous positions. Just as increasing violence against the Huguenots after 1560 apparently encouraged Calvin to become more radical, the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre of 1572 and the violence that ensued seems to have had a similar effect on other Reformed thinkers.

One of the most important works of Reformed political theology from this era was written by the pseudonymous Stephanus Junius Brutus (probably Philippe du Plessis-Mornay [1549–1623] or Hubert Languet [1518–1581]). *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, first published in 1579, seems to echo Calvin’s teachings regarding private persons in his *Institutes*, such as when the author

¹² Calvin, commentary on Daniel 6:22. *The John Calvin Collection*, vol. 7, AGES Digital Library (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1998), CD-ROM. Unless otherwise specified, all references to Calvin’s works are from this collection.

¹³ Steven M. Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 160.

writes that a people may justly revolt against a tyrant, but “when we speak of the whole people, we mean those who have received authority from the people—the magistrates, clearly, who are inferior to the king and chosen by the people, or constituted in some other way.”¹⁴ However, Brutus later notes that, on rare occasions, God specifically calls a private individual to resist or even kill a tyrant. He points to Moses, Ehud, and Jehu as biblical exemplars in this respect. But he cautions that “when God has neither spoken with his own mouth nor, extraordinarily, through the prophets, we should be especially sober and circumspect in this matter.”¹⁵ As well, if someone invades a country to which he has no title, “it is lawful for any private person [*privatus quislibet*] to oust this sort of tyrant, were he to force his way in.”¹⁶

It seems to us that early Reformed authors on this subject are struggling with a tension, if not a quandary. On the one hand, resistance by private persons seems the natural outgrowth of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and the derivative understanding of a right of conscience. On the other, these authors are elites who seem to fear opening the door to chaos and disorder of the sort seen in Münster (1524–25).

II. *The Development of a Tradition in England and Scotland*

Space constraints do not permit us to continue to trace the development of Reformed resistance theory in Continental Europe. It is our impression that it remained a bit more conservative than what developed in the Anglo-American world—that is, that Reformed thinkers were more likely to insist that active resistance be led by lesser magistrates and not by private persons.¹⁷ Across the channel, however, a consensus was beginning to emerge that active resistance to tyrants should be led by lesser magistrates, but, if they do not do their jobs, the people themselves have a right, and even a duty, to actively resist tyrants.

For instance, the clergyman John Ponet (1516–1556) contended in his *Short Treatise on Political Power* (1556) that private men should generally not kill tyrants, except

¹⁴ Stephanus Junius Brutus, *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, ed. George Garnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61–62 (quote from 62).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁷ Quentin Skinner makes a similar observation with respect to the sixteenth century in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 210. Chapters 7–9 of this work provide an excellent, concise overview of the development of Reformed political thought.

where execution of just punishment upon tyrants, idolaters, and treacherous governors is either by the whole state utterly neglected, or the prince with the nobility and council conspire the subversion or alteration of their country and people.¹⁸

John Knox (1517–1572) clearly encouraged Scottish nobles to resist the tyrant Queen Mary, and works like his *Letter to His Beloved Brethren the Commonality of Scotland* can be read as urging private citizens to actively resist the tyrants if their superiors “be negligent or yet pretend to maintain tyrants in their tyranny.”¹⁹ Likewise, his good friend Christopher Goodman preferred that active resistance be led by magistrates, but he taught that if magistrates refuse to act, the people have a duty to resist tyrants. In his words, if the lesser

Magistrates would wholly despise and betraye the justice and Lawes of God, you which are subjects with them shall be condemned except you mayntayne and defend the same Lawes against them, and all others to the utmost of your powers, that is, with all strength, with all your hart, and with all your soule.²⁰

More radically still, George Buchanan (1506–1582) argued in *The Right of the Kingdom of Scotland* (1579) that tyrants may be removed by “the whole body of the people” and “every individual citizen.”²¹

These arguments helped lay the intellectual foundation for the English Civil War (1642–1651), which joined members of Parliament with those who wanted a more thoroughly Reformed Church of England against the Royalists who, it was feared, wanted to return England to the Catholic faith. Early in the conflict Scotland’s Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) published his important *Lex, Rex*, wherein he argued,

We teach that any private man may kill a tyrant, void of all title And if he have not the consent of the people, he is an usurper, for we know no external lawful calling that kings have now, or their family, to the crown, but only the call of the people.²²

More radically still, John Milton, whose commitment to Christian orthodoxy has been questioned (with good reason), but whose political views are

¹⁸ In Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100–1625* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 701.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 694.

²⁰ John Goodman, *How Superior Powers Ought to Be Obeyed by Their Subjects and Wherein They May Lawfully by God’s Word Be Disobeyed and Resisted* (1558), as quoted in Herbert Grabes, ed., *Writing the Early Modern English Nation: The Transformation of National Identity in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 64.

²¹ Quoted in Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2:343.

²² Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex, or The Law and the Prince* (1564; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), 33.

reasonably seen as a logical working out of Reformed resistance theory, contended in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1648) that “the people as oft as they shall judge it for the best, either choose him or reject him, retaine him or depose him though no Tyrant, meerly by the liberty and right of free born Men, to be govern’d as seems to them best.”²³

As radical as Milton’s position may be, for most Calvinist leaders the English Civil War—and, later, the Glorious Revolution of 1688—did not present a dilemma with respect to *who* may resist, as by almost any definition it was “lesser magistrates” who led the resistance. Although it would be profitable to trace the course of debates regarding the Civil War, the beheading of the perceived tyrant Charles I, and the Glorious Revolution in England, for our purposes it is necessary to turn to how these debates played out in Britain’s American colonies.

III. *John Cotton and John Davenport on the Regicides*

In a brief passage in his 1644 book *The Key of the Kingdom of Heaven*, John Cotton (1585–1652) explicitly denied the right of private individuals (and even of churches) to resist duly constituted civil powers. He did, however, note that “if some of the same persons be also be trusted by the civil state, with the preservation and protection of the laws and liberties” of the people—that is, if they could reasonably be regarded as holding the position of a lesser magistrate—it was entirely legitimate for such individuals to gather together with others so appointed “in a public civil assembly (whether in council or camp)” to redress injustice. It is worth noting, particularly in the context of the English Civil Wars, Cotton’s inclusive parenthetical “in council or camp”: granted that one of the major grievances against King Charles I was his refusal to regularly call Parliaments, it seems likely Cotton envisioned some sort of extra-Parliamentary body of nevertheless recognizable civil officers might be led to action on the people’s behalf. Arguably, this is indeed what happened a few years later in 1648, when the New Model Army forced the Long Parliament to disperse.²⁴

Cotton’s colleagues in New England were universally sympathetic to the English rebels, even sheltering the regicides Edward Whalley (1607–1675) and William Goffe (1605–1679) from royal retribution after the Restoration.

²³ John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1648), in *Arcopagica and Other Political Writings of John Milton* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press, 1999), 63.

²⁴ Larzer Ziff, ed., *John Cotton on the Churches of New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 156; Francis J. Bremer, “In Defense of Regicide: John Cotton on the Execution of Charles I,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 37.1 (1980): 106–7.

Likewise, they offered asylum and support to their coreligionists fleeing French persecution. In 1689, the leader of the French Reformed congregation in Boston, Ezekiel Carré, published a sermon *The Charitable Samaritan* (1689) that “went quite far in legitimizing the Camisards’ armed resistance to Louis XIV’s dragoons.”²⁵ Carré used the parable to address the right of individual self-defense and implied that political resistance by private individuals was simply an extension of this right. We cannot address in any detail here arguments raised by non-English Reformed migrants to colonial North America, but once again, the genuine hazards encountered by Reformed Protestants under tyrannical regimes seem to have pushed toward a more individualistic understanding of the right of resistance.

IV. *The Glorious Revolution in America*

The aggressive efforts of the restored Stuart monarchy to assert control over British colonial America in the late seventeenth century provided plentiful opportunities for Reformed dissenters to refine their resistance theories. The previously independent colonies of Massachusetts, Plymouth, Connecticut, New York, and the Jerseys were consolidated under a single Royal Governor, Sir Edmund Andros, to form the Dominion of New England in 1686, and the colonists in those places found themselves stripped of their elected assemblies and subject to the arbitrary denial of their property rights. The hierarchical and autocratic nature of the Dominion government and the close ties of its leaders to the court of Catholic King James II further exacerbated tensions. When news of William and Mary’s accession to the throne reached America, popular rebellions broke out in Massachusetts and New York; similar motivations led to the overthrow of the proprietary government of the Catholic Lord Baltimore and his family in Maryland. In each instance, many (although not all) of the individuals involved can be clearly identified as Reformed, and much of the rhetoric used to justify the rebellions draws upon the previous century and half of the tradition we have sketched above.

Unsurprisingly, these arguments took their fullest form in Puritan Massachusetts, so we will look closely at those sources before briefly turning to New York and Maryland.

²⁵ Catharine Randall, *From a Far Country: Camisards and Huguenots in the Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 93.

1. "Providence Hath Opened a Door for Us": Massachusetts

At noon on April 18, 1689, the leadership of the rebellion in Boston gathered the citizens together to hear a "Declaration" of the grievances against Andros and a justification for the decision to take up arms read aloud. Here, and elsewhere in their public statements, the leaders of the rebellion—men of substance, many of whom held positions of leadership in colonial society—were adamant that it was an unplanned, popularly conceived event.²⁶ So successful were they at propagating this narrative that Elisha Cooke (one of Massachusetts's agents to the court of William and Mary) reported that in a council session regarding the propriety of the Revolution, "one of the Lords said, 'I perceive the Revolution was there, as it was here, by the unanimous agreement of the people.'"²⁷ In other words, the primary understanding of resistance advanced by advocates of the Glorious Revolution in Boston was as an individual right: time and again, the rebellion is justified on the grounds of the people's sense of "their own necessary safety and defense from the imminent dangers they apprehend they lie open unto."²⁸

The argument from a natural right to self-defense almost by definition leads to a right of popular, individual resistance, if for no other reason than its logical link to the purposes of government and the rule of law. Indeed, in a broadside published on May 18, 1689, entitled "The Case of Massachusetts Colony Considered," the pseudonymous author Philo. Angl. argued that since the good of the people was the fundamental law, if it had required them to overthrow their existing government, such an action was legitimate.²⁹ As the provisional council explained, the colonists' actions were legitimate not only because they were taken in self-defense, but also because Andros's government had been "illegal and arbitrary":³⁰ illegal because in violation of the colony's original charter, and arbitrary because Andros had ignored the rule of law and acted by fiat, trampling on "both the *Liberty and Property of England Protestants*."³¹ For these reasons, Cotton Mather would later

²⁶ On the events leading up to the Revolution, see Ian K. Steele, "Communicating an English Revolution to the Colonies, 1688–1689," *Journal of British Studies* 24.3 (July 1985): 333–57.

²⁷ Elisha Cooke to Simon Bradstreet, October 16, 1690, in Robert Earle Moody and Richard Clive Simmons, eds., *The Glorious Revolution in Massachusetts: Selected Documents, 1689–1692* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1988), 462. Henceforth *CSM Records*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹ Richard C. Simmons, "The Massachusetts Revolution of 1689: Three Early American Political Broadside," *Journal of American Studies* 2.1 (April 1968): 8–9.

³⁰ "Address to the King and Queen, 20 May 1689," *CSM Records*, 77–78.

³¹ See [Rawson and Sewall], *The Revolution in New England Justified*, in W. H. Whitmore, ed., *The Andros Tracts*, 3 vols., Prince Society, V–VIII (Boston, 1868–1874; repr., 1971), 1:71–72.

argue that the April Revolutionaries were “not *resisting* an ordinance of God but *restraining* a cursed violation of his ordinance, [when they] imprisoned Sir Edmond Andros and his accomplices.”³² By this logic, the people of Massachusetts were not godless rebels,³³ but devout men anxious to protect the glory of God and his prerogatives.

Mather was not alone in this understanding: the anonymous author of another broadside distributed in the weeks immediately following the Revolution defended it having been taken “out of conscience and tender respect to God’s Glory, loyalty to His Highness our prince, and fidelity to our country.”³⁴ Likewise, Edward Rawson and Samuel Sewall (writing to defend New England to an English audience) argued that “the scripture speaks of a lawful and good rebellion, as well as of that which is unlawful.”³⁵ Andros and his minions had been “wolves ... among sheep in a wilderness,” they asserted, and the Revolution necessary to “keep them from ravening.”³⁶ New Englanders had patiently endured much injustice, acting only when it became obvious that the integrity of their community was in danger from Andros and “his creatures,” who “contrary to the laws of God and Men, commit[ed] a rape on a whole Colony.”³⁷ By alluding to the metaphor of the unified body and comparing the colony’s trials to rape, Rawson and Sewall invoked the highest level of personal right.

While the impetus of the Revolution might have been popular, the people of the Bay Colony also understood it to be providential. Many of the declarations accompanying the election returns from the towns for a new General Court after the Revolution include statements that described the revolutionaries as “such as God moved to seek the welfare of this people.” It was God who had “stirr[ed] up the hearts of so many of our [illegible] friends” and thereby had “deliver[ed] us, from such bondage and oppression (thereby opening to us a door at which we hope our liberties both civil and sacred may enter in).”³⁸ Although they acted as individuals, the citizens of Massachusetts understood their revolution and those who led it to be guided by

³² CM, *Parentator* (Boston, 1724), 117–18 (emphasis added).

³³ A crime they were accused of by John Palmer, *An Impartial Account* (London, 1690) in *Andros Tracts*, 1:56–57.

³⁴ Simmons, “Three Early American Political Broadside,” 10.

³⁵ [Rawson and Sewall], *Revolution in New England Justified*, in *Andros Tracts*, 1:129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Gloucester, Beverly, Wenham, and Salem Village to COS (ND, C. May 1, 1689), *CSM Records*, 360. This language is also found in statements from Wenham, Beverly, Stowe, Milton, Boxford, and Manchester; *CSM Records*, 362, 363–64, 365, 366, 367, 380; Reading, May 6, 1689, *CSM Records*, 368.

the Holy Spirit. They saw their actions as not only made possible but also sanctioned by the overarching sovereignty of God's will.³⁹

In the public debate over the legitimacy of the revolution, this providential reading is joined by the suggestion that perhaps since many of the leaders of the rebellion had previously been elected to the colony's suspended 1686 government, they might be seen in some sense as a continuation of that earlier government. The author argued implausibly that since the Court had been dismissed prior to the fulfillment of its term, they might be considered to be "a standing Court, and adjourned," able to be recalled by the people to service, despite the three-year gap. He does not belabor this point, nor is it obvious that any significant number of his contemporaries found such an argument convincing. Nevertheless, it does suggest one possible reading of the Boston Revolution as justifiable on the grounds of an existing body of "lesser magistrates," albeit operating in absentia.⁴⁰

2. "Martyrs for Their Loyalty":⁴¹ New York

In May of 1689, news of the Boston Revolution reached the Puritan settlements in Suffolk County, on Long Island. Like the people of Massachusetts, Long Islanders not only found the Dominion of New England to be "arbitrary," they also suspected its leaders of colluding with the French with the intention of subjecting them to "Popery and Slavery." Thus, although they had "groaned under the heavy burdens imposed upon us by an arbitrary power for a considerable time," inspired by the example of their neighbors across the sound, the freemen of Suffolk County declared their intention of taking up arms for their "own self-preservation, being without any to depend on at present, till it pleases God to order better." The reference to their lack of "any to depend on" is curious, for unlike Massachusetts, the colony of New York had never enjoyed a popularly elected assembly, but (under both the Dutch and English) had been governed exclusively by a council of elite appointees accountable only to the powers overseas, and not to the people directly. This suggests that the reference is less a matter of practicality and more a matter of philosophy: as adherents to the Reformed tradition, Long Islanders would be familiar with arguments limiting political resistance to lesser magistrates. Their precision in clarifying that they are "without any to depend on" is thus a way of signaling to the broader world that they are not

³⁹ See the anonymous and undated "Opinion against Resumption of the Charter," printed in *CSM Records*, 359–60.

⁴⁰ Simmons, "Three Early American Political Broadside," 7–8.

⁴¹ "Loyalty Vindicated," (1698) in Charles M. Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675–1690* (1915; reprinted by The Scholar's Bookshelf, 2005), 401.

illegitimately usurping the role that would otherwise belong to the lesser magistrates as a matter of their office.⁴²

In the absence of such persons, however, the Suffolk freeholders seem to take for granted their right to resistance as individuals, stating not only that they will act in their own self-defense until “it pleases God to order better” but that it is their “bounden duty” to do so.

Herein we have endeavored nothing less, than what mere duty to God and our country doth call for at our hands, committing our enterprise to His blessing, and desire all our neighbors to join with us in praises and *all just actions* for the prosperity and safety of our country from all approaching dangers.⁴³

Here the right of resistance, although given pious overtones, is nevertheless presented as a matter of individual conscience and agency: the obligation to protect the community against the perceived threat to both their religious and political existence in the form of a French invasion falls not on the holder of particular office but on each citizen as citizen.

Even though their ties with their former colony of Massachusetts were significantly stronger than any they might feel toward the still majority Dutch population of New York, Long Islanders were nevertheless willing to make common cause with their coreligionists. It appears likely that they supported Jacob Leisler when he was selected by the city militia as the interim governor of the colony after they deposed Lt. Governor Francis Nicholson a few weeks later. At this point, the question of who was leading the revolution in New York grows increasingly complicated: Leisler, a staunch Reformed Protestant with a mixed Dutch and German ethnic heritage, was descended from that section of the nobility within the former Holy Roman Empire who “interpreted and enforced the laws of the temporal state”—Calvin’s “lesser magistrates,” in other words. Moreover, his grandfather, Doctor Jacob Leisler, was part of “a circle of Reformed jurists who sought to legitimate resistance to a monarch.” Historian David William Voorhees argues that Leisler not only knew about his family’s background in Europe but also viewed himself as acting in the role of a lesser magistrate (not as a private citizen) during the 1689 rebellion in New York.⁴⁴

⁴² “Declaration of the Freeholders of Suffolk County, Long Island, 10 May 1689,” in John Romeyn Brodhead, ed., *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Company, 1853), 2:577. See also “Lieutenant Governor Nicholson and Council of New-York to the Board of Trade, 15 May 1689,” in *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 2:575.

⁴³ “Declaration of the Freeholders of Suffolk County, Long Island, 10 May 1689,” in *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 2:577 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ David William Voorhees, “The ‘fervent Zeale’ of Jacob Leisler,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 51.3 (1994): 451–65; the quote is on page 451.

Voorhees's careful reading of the extant Dutch records of the rebellion has uncovered the hidden religious commitments at the root of Leisler's political activism. Far from being the economically motivated opportunist of the traditional historical narrative, on this reading, Leisler appears as a man driven by a deep sense of religious calling: in light of the danger of encroaching papacy, "he believed that the hand of God compelled him to assume an active role."⁴⁵ This is certainly in keeping with the defense of Leisler's actions offered in *Loyalty Vindicated*, a 1698 pamphlet in which Leisler appears as a vigorous opponent of "the damn'd doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance" and to those false preachers (presumably Anglicans) who had told the people "that we ought patiently to hold our protestant throats to be cut by the command of a popish king." The author continues,

When Capt. Leisler with his friends had taken hold of that wonderful deliverance offered immediately from God to redeem his people from slavery upon earth, and popish damnation in Hell, to have false priests of Baal get up, and use their wicked eloquence to make the people believe a lie, even in the house of the God of Truth, and from the pulpit, to tell these captains of our temporal salvation to their faces, that being faithful to their God, their Country, and their laws, in the defence of the holy protestant religion, and the rights and liberties of Englishmen, and their thankful declaring for the most glorious Prince upon Earth their deliverer: was the blackest of treason and rebellion.⁴⁶

Note that Leisler's defenders here see the conflict not over who can resist but over the question of whether militant resistance is a legitimate option for Christians at all. Although it is somewhat unclear whether Leisler is meant to be seen as a private individual or as one of the "lesser magistrates," he (and "his friends"—one suspects this refers to popular supporters of the revolution like the Suffolk County freeholders) are portrayed to be representative of the true Calvinist position of a robust right of resistance. In contrast, the Anglican ministers who opposed the revolution are presented as "popish" and even heathenish—they are "false priests" who in deceiving the people are guilty of "treason and rebellion." Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this prejudicial treatment of the Church of England, we see support for Leisler often came from non-English sources: writing after Leisler had been imprisoned by the English for his actions, a group of Dutch apologists implored William and Mary to recognize that the rebellion had been motivated by a desire to preserve "the true reformed religion" from the threat of "the French enemies

⁴⁵ Voorhees, "The 'fervent Zeale' of Jacob Leisler," 450–51, 467.

⁴⁶ "Loyalty Vindicated," in *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 387–88.

[who] were already preparing to attack them,” and against whom Nicholson had refused to act.⁴⁷

3. “So Great and General a Jubilee”: Maryland

Although Maryland was ostensibly founded as a haven for the perpetually harried English Catholics, adherents to the Church of Rome were never more than a vocal minority among its actual settlers. Moreover, evidence suggests that as early as 1638, some subset of the Protestants in the colony were Puritan sympathizers. Puritan influence in Maryland only grew when the proprietary government formalized its position of religious toleration in the 1640s, including the resettlement of nearly two hundred Puritan households from nearby Virginia when that colony enacted anti-Puritan legislation. By the 1670s, Lord Baltimore was complaining that nearly three-quarters of the population were religious dissenters; to be sure, this included a significant number of Quakers, but it also would have included the strongly Calvinist Presbyterians and Independents (either Baptists or Puritans/Congregationalists). Thus, although the theological commitments of the leaders of the so-called Protestant Association who rebelled against the (Catholic) proprietors of Maryland in 1689 are difficult to pin down with any precision, it seems likely, given the dearth of confessional Anglicans in the colony, that at least a portion of the rank-and-file Associators would have identified themselves as members of the Reformed tradition. We will therefore briefly consider their declared justifications for taking up arms as part of the ongoing development of Reformed resistance theory.

For many years, although they had accumulated significant grievances against the proprietary government for failing to recognize their traditional rights, the freemen of Maryland had worked quietly through the existing political channels to achieve a satisfactory resolution. Even in the tumultuous political environment of 1689, they were willing to resign themselves to “mourn and lament only in silence, would our duty to God, our Allegiance to his viceregent [i.e., King William and Queen Mary], and the care and welfare of ourselves and posterity permit us.” In fact, for all three reasons—obedience to God, loyalty to the newly crowned King and Queen, and self-preservation—they found themselves compelled to overthrow the proprietary government. The Associators therefore declared themselves “discharged, dissolved, and free from all manner of duty, obligation, or fidelity to the deputies, governors, or chief magistrates here, as such ... they having ... endeavored the destruction of our religion, lives, liberties, and properties all which they are bound to protect and free to join in a divinely sanctioned liberation of the English nation as a whole.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See “Memoir and Relation of what occurred in the city and province of New-York in America, in the years 1690 and 1691 ... At The Hague, the 15th October, 1691,” in *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 809–12.

⁴⁸ The proprietors of Maryland, the Calvert family, were notorious proponents of Catholic absolutism, and this created significant conflicts with the freemen of the colony; see Sutto,

In the Declaration, the Protestant Associators acknowledge that the first duty of the Christian subject is to obey, even when such obedience brings them personal suffering, and to trust in the sovereignty of God to orchestrate a remedy. What is most interesting about how they justify their departure from this standard is the ways in which it obliquely refers back to Calvin's notion of a divinely appointed political deliverer. The Marylanders see William as such a figure, and thus as an indication that they are released from the *normal* state of suffering obedience to defend themselves under the aegis of an *extraordinary* intervention in the course of political affairs. The document does not use Calvin's terminology, but it does seem to cast William in the role of a divine deliverer and to suggest that the individual rebellion of the colonists was linked to this other event and somehow justified thereby.

Conclusion

As we have attempted to illustrate here, the true question among the international Reformed movement was not whether active resistance to political leaders could be legitimate, but *who* might legitimately initiate such resistance. The answer appears to have varied less according to particular philosophical convictions and more according to prudential grounds: where lesser magistrates were available, their interposition on the people's behalf was the expected avenue for resistance. Where such persons were lacking or unable to intervene on behalf of the faithful, Reformed congregations and their leaders seem to have been more than willing to take matters into their own hands, albeit often cloaking their individual agency with the language of divine providence and deliverance.

It is noteworthy that virtually every primary source we discussed above was written before Locke's *Second Treatise* was published or became available to colonists in America.⁴⁹ In the second part of this essay, we will continue to trace from the early part of this century to the War for American Independence and its immediate aftermath the question of who may actively and justly resist tyrannical authority.⁵⁰

Loyal Protestants, chapters 1, 2, and 7 especially. The quotations are from "The Declaration of Protestant Subjects in Maryland, 1689," in *Narratives of the Insurrections*, 305, 311–12.

⁴⁹ On the availability and use of Locke's works in America, see John Dunn, "The Politics of Locke in England and America in the Eighteenth Century," in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives: A Collection of New Essays*, ed. John Yolton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 45–80.

⁵⁰ Forthcoming in *Unio cum Christo* 4.1 (April 2018).