

*The Declaration of Independence as Conspiracy Theory: Anti-Popery and the Origins of
American Nationalism*

America's 1776: Independence and its Enduring Legacies

American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 4 June 2026

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[Note: This essay assumes a basic familiarity with the text of the Declaration of Independence, so it might be worth giving the Declaration one more look before reading it.]

With two brief exceptions, both heavily inflected by the Enlightenment (the Nature's God" whose laws justified the creation of an independent country and "Supreme Judge of the world" who is appealed to "for the rectitude" of the revolutionaries' "intentions") religion figures not at all within the Declaration of Independence. And yet, the document is permeated by a fundamental Anglo-American ideology that was as much about religion as politics. Key words, phrases, and references scattered throughout the text invoke concepts and concerns that would have been deeply familiar to all Britons on both sides of the Atlantic. Scholars have explored various facets of the Declaration: its relationship to political thought, especially the Enlightenment and John Locke; its logic; its scientific and legalistic reasoning; its immediate social and political context; its social and political consequences; its novelty; its morality. Some see the preamble as key to its meaning; others the body of the text. Some fret about its relationship to the enslavement of people of African descent. Most highlight its principles of liberty and equality.¹

A few scholars have suggested that the Declaration should also be read as a conspiracy theory: "the original American conspiracy theory."² Long ago, Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood pointed to the importance of conspiratorial thinking to the Revolutionaries.³ More recently, the fear of racial conspiracies – between the British, Native Americans on the frontier, and rebellious slaves in the plantation colonies – has been highlighted as key to uniting colonists' in support of

independence.⁴ Here I want to suggest a more specific identity for the key conspiracy theory lurking beneath this sacred American text: anti-popery. In developing this theme, my approach is closest to that of Pauline Maier, for whom “the Declaration was a workaday document of the Second Continental Congress, one of many similar documents.” Far from a radical or original “statement of political philosophy,” it was “purposely unexceptional.” In her metaphor, it is not a brilliant solo but rather a massive orchestral piece expressing the ideas and sentiments of multitudes of colonial Americans. At the same time, I should make clear that I am interested in the Declaration’s origins of the and not in what Americans subsequently make of it, which is the main concern of most studies of the Declaration as well as the second half of Maier’s book.⁵

Anti-popery, like its close relative anti-Catholicism and more distant one of classical Republicanism, is a modern concept developed by scholars to describe and analyze early modern Anglo-American political and religious culture. If anti-Catholicism describes the “antipathy toward the Roman Catholic religion or an antipathy toward those individuals who practice that religion,” anti-popery was the ideological opposition to the religious *and political* example of the pope and his Church, with the political example being one of absolutist tyranny. American scholars have generally treated them as prejudices, for they certainly often manifested as seemingly “irrational passions,” but historians of early modern England have come to realize that both also had a strong ideological dimension as well, expressing the religious and political values of Protestants that influenced so much of the political and religious upheaval of Stuart Britain and Ireland. The difference with anti-popery is that Protestants as well as Roman Catholics could be accused of popery, even when it was clear that they were still Protestant and not simply crypto-Catholics.⁶

Anti-popery reflects the blend religion and politics that was typical in colonial America. In the words of the Connecticut minister Samuel Sherwood, quoting the New Testament, “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” More than just antipathy to Roman Catholicism, however, anti-popery was based on an understanding of Christian history that, for Sherwood,

reached back to Book of Revelations, which described “Popery, or the reign and kingdom of the man of sin, the old serpent, the dragon, its rise and progress, and its downfall and overthrow.”⁷ Cotton Mather dated it to the rise of the papacy, which was not only an illegitimate authority, but one whose reign was attended by pernicious religious, political, and social consequences. As he explained in the 1690s, “ANTICHRIST, that Enemy of the Almighty, IS NOW AT HAND” and the Papacy, the “UNIVERSAL BISHOP, is the FORE-RUNNER of ANTICHRIST.” For Mather, the trouble began after the fall of the Roman Empire, when “a little Priest . . . most blasphemously usurped” the title of pope then turned to arbitrary power and persecution to retain his hold on power. However, Mather’s main beef was not with the papacy but with the Protestant Church of England and its “Shackles of Conformity to the popish Remainders.” He was pleading for toleration for the Protestant Dissenter, who he referred to as “Freemen” inspired by the principles of “Liberty” that could not in good conscience accept that an “illegal, despotick, and arbitrary Government may be imposed upon the brave English Nation.” Clearly identifying himself and all of New England with the Freemen in England, he proclaimed their watchwords to be “LIBERTY and PROPERTY.”⁸

That it would not be too difficult to see this version of Cotton Mather agreeably rubbing shoulders with the delegates to the Continental Congress says much about the degree to which this seventeenth century way of thinking, and its inextricable blend of religious and political ideology, persisted through the Revolutionary era. Thomas Kidd, in his *Religious History of the American Revolution* notes that revolutionary Americans like Sherwood made an alteration in “the identity of Antichrist” from “Catholicism and Islam” to “the British.” Sherwood did not label King George the Antichrist, but he insisted “that the anti-christian, tyrannical scheme of popery” had “spread” its “influence, not only thro’ the territories of papal Rome, but thro’ all the nations and kingdoms of the world in general,” and was willing to contemplate “whether there be a reference to the corrupt system of tyranny and oppression, that has of late been fabricated and adopted by the ministry and parliament of Great-Britain, which appears so favoruable to popery

and the Roman catholic interest, aiming at the extension and establishment of it, and so awfully threatens the civil and religious liberties of all sound Protestants.” While Kidd thinks Americans were embracing “a new kind of civil spirituality” after 1763, one that “put a heavy emphasis on political values,” a much better explanation is they were simply adapting the anti-popery they had inherited from the seventeenth century to the circumstances of the late eighteenth century. It was not a new or distinctively American way of thinking, but rather very old and very English.⁹

In early modern England as well as eighteenth century America, anti-popery had a crucial predictive quality that could spur people into drastic action. Countless sermons, pamphlets, stories, and other accounts insisted that popery would always trend in the same oppressive direction of tyranny, corruption, ignorance and slavery if it was not stopped. Once a series of events could be fit into this pattern, the end of the story was clear. The so-called Grand Remonstrance drawn up by Parliament less than a year before the outbreak of the Civil War, can be considered (at 53 pages) a sort of verbose grandparent of the Declaration of Independence. Its aim was “the preventing of . . . a malignant and pernicious designe of subverting the Fundamentall Lawes, and Principles of Government; upon which the Religion, and justice of this Kingdom are firmly establisht.” At the top of their list of culprits were the “Jesuited Papists,” followed by the “Bishops, and the corrupt part of the clergy,” and then certain “Councillors and Courtiers, as far as private ends have engaged themselves to further the interests of some forraign Princes or States, to the prejudice of His Majesty, and the State at home.”¹⁰

Thus, the Declaration in good constitutional company as a pre-emptive strike when it affirmed that it list of a “long train of abuses and usurpations”, including that the King “has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution,” were “pursuing invariably the same Object,” namely “a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism.” Could one doubt that the “history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States”? The monarchy had tried it before in England.

Other parts of the Declaration echo additional aspects of seventeenth century England's constitutional struggles. Dissolving "Representative Houses repeatedly" recalls one of the complaints of the Grand Remonstrance, namely the several Parliaments Charles I had dissolved rather than listen to. So does the refusal to recall Assemblies, another tactic Stuart monarchs applied to their unruly Parliaments.

Calling "together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures" is reminiscent of Charles II's Oxford Parliament of 1681, which put an end to the Exclusion Crisis (when Parliament tried to prevent Roman Catholics, like Charles younger brother and apparent heir James, Duke of York, from inheriting the throne) by isolating Parliament from its support base in London. The Exclusion Crisis had followed immediately on the heels of the Popish Plot of 1678, when Roman Catholics were accused of conspiring to kill Charles and replace him with a Roman Catholic monarch. Thomas Jefferson's library contained contemporary accounts of the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis, including Thomas Staveley's *The Romish Horseleech*, originally published in 1674 "to alarm the Public in Behalf of their Property" at a time when the court "espoused the Cause of Popery." Staveley's criticism was mostly economic. He claimed that the Roman Catholic church and "sucked from the people" its "Wealth . . . and Riches" while preventing them from becoming skilled in "Trading" and "all the Arts and Sciences." A comparison of Protestant Holland and England with Catholic Spain, Austria, or Portugal would confirm this outcome, and doing so was a regular habit of Anglo-American tourists, including Thomas Jefferson. Traveling through the Rhineland in 1788, Jefferson noted that the Catholic city of Cologne "appears to have much commerce, and to abound with poor," but "the commerce is principally in the hands of protestants," a small minority in this large city. "They are extremely restricted in their operations," Jefferson noted, "and otherwise oppressed in every form by the government which is catholic, and excessively intolerant."¹¹

The Glorious Revolution, which drove the Catholic King James II from the throne and eventually ensured that only Protestants could inherit the throne, had an even stronger impact on the Declaration. Its language of opposing the king's "invasions on the rights of the people" recalls the propaganda used to justify removing James from the throne, as do the complaints about judicial offices being dependent on royal pleasure and the use of standing armies reflect issues that were important in 1688. Revolutionary Americans were immersed in this patriotically Protestant style of history and analysis in all sorts of ways. To name one prominent example, George Washington's book collection was much smaller and more secular than Jefferson's, but it did include an account of the trial of the Seven Bishops that year for refusing to endorse James' Declaration of Indulgence offering toleration for Catholics and Protestant Dissenters. Their conviction convinced leading contemporaries that the "Growth of Popery" (as the book termed it) had to be stopped, setting in motion the chain of events that led to the Glorious Revolution several months later. Washington's familiarity with this literature explains another of his outbursts from shortly before the Declaration was drafted: He feared the "Invasion of our Rights and Priviledges by the Mother Country" would "make us as tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway."¹²

Consciously or not, Washington's language linked Parliament to the discredited Catholic King James II. Another rhetorical tactic associated it with the Papacy. Since the dawn of the Reformation, English Protestants had refused to address the head of the Church in Rome by his recognized title of "Pope," instead demoting him to simply the "Bishop of Rome." For example, in February 1737, Stephen Williams, a minister in Western Massachusetts, preached a sermon to his congregation based on 2 Thessalonians, "yt ye pope or ye Bishop of rome is ye antichrist" who, together with "his followers," upheld "corrupt doctrines," such as teaching "men to pray to ye saints & Angells." He repeated the sermon in the winter of 1738, shortly after his neighbor Jonathan Edwards published *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* describing the first religious revival in nearby Northampton in 1733-35 that would spark the Great Awakening

(there is a longstanding tendency to look for at least the religious roots of the Revolution in the Great Awakening, but clearly they go back much further). Similarly, Congress' hostility to Parliament is expressed in essentially the same terms. Parliament was not named. It was simply a "jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws," or merely "the legislature" of the British. Moreover, treating an authority based in a different land, or "foreign jurisdiction," that claimed "an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us" through pretensions to supremacy was an English tradition that dated back to even before the Reformation. The 1392 statute of premunire was passed under Richard II in response, as Sir William Blackstone explained in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, to "the exorbitant power claimed and exercised in England by the pope, which even in the days of blind zeal was too heavy for our ancestors to bear." Rhetorically diminishing claims to supremacy was an old English trick.¹³

The anti-popish dimensions of the Declaration of Independence may not be immediately obvious, but they are clear in various closely related documents, like the final appeal the Continental Congress made to the "people of Great Britain" in 1775. Proclaiming English rights to be "sacred," and boasting that the British nation had been led "to greatness by the hand of Liberty," the Congressmen wondered why their fellows in Britain were now "forging chains for her Friends and Children" by advocating "Slavery and Oppression"? They compared the Declaratory Act's claim about Parliament's ability to "bind us in all cases without exception" with "the interdicts of the Pope." This link was sharpened by the recent Quebec Act. Parliament had no authorization "by the constitution to establish a religion fraught with sanguinary and impious tenets, or to erect an arbitrary form of government in any quarter of the globe."¹⁴ Now "English settlers" in Quebec lived as "subjects of an arbitrary government, deprived of trial by jury, and when imprisoned cannot claim the benefit of the habeas corpus Act, that great bulwark and palladium of English liberty." Congress simply could not "suppress" its "astonishment, that a British Parliament should ever consent to establish in that country a religion that has deluged your island in blood, and dispersed impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder and rebellion through every

part of the world.” Surely “the Ministry” intended to reduce the Thirteen Colonies to the condition of the Quebeckers? Brought down “to a state of perfect humiliation and slavery,” British Americans would be taxed to pay for armies recruited from “the Roman Catholics of this vast continent” that would then “enslave you.”¹⁵

The Declaration expressed these views more vaguely but succinctly. Everyone would have known the identity of the “neighbouring Province” where “the free System of English Laws” was abolished and “an Arbitrary government” established. They also would have known the anti-popish background to the Declaration’s assertion that “enlarging [Quebec’s] Boundaries” was designed “to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies.”

On the more positive side, there is another echo of Reformation-era politics in declaring the colonies to be “Free and Independent states.” Although finally embraced in this moment, it had long been the bogeyman against which colonists hoping for reconciliation had struggled. Indeed, the assumption that the colonists aimed at Independence was originally an English one. That fear can be traced back to the early seventeenth century, when royalists feared that Puritans intended to set up a “Free State” in America. These fears were not exclusively associated with New England.¹⁶ For example, in 1623 Captain John Bargrave, an investor in the Virginia Company, with two brothers who had gone to the colony (one as a minister), accused Sir Edwin Sandys, the Parliamentary leader who was currently directing the colony’s policies, of wanting “to erect a free state in Virginia” because he was hostile to monarchy and his ideal form of government “was that of Geneva.” His proof? Sandys was recruiting “Brownistes and Separatists” to settle in the colony by promising them that “they shall have no Govermt putt upon them but by their owne consents.” For Bargrave, this was just one of several pieces of evidence that proved Sandys “aymed at nothing more then to make a free popular state there.”¹⁷

Although the scholarship on anti-popery is large and growing, there is still some confusion that may be hindering its adoption by early Americanists. Many scholars, especially in

Britain, tend to use popery and Roman Catholicism interchangeably (as early modern Britons did), and thus anti-popery is often discussed in the more familiar (to Americans) terms of anti-Catholicism and both are primarily associated with religious figures and issues. After all, our best sources for anti-popery are generally ministers, for they are the ones who talked about it the most. Thus, we have the New England preacher Ebenezer Baldwin insisting in 1774 that the Quebec Act exposed Parliament's "fix'd plan for enslaving the colonies, or bringing them under arbitrary government." Reminding his audience of their seventeenth century origins, Baldwin insisted that once America lost its "civil liberty" an "ecclesiastical tyranny . . . will like a mighty torrent overspread our land." He then applied to British soldiers the anti-popish tropes that had long smeared the reputations of their Spanish and French counterparts: they stood ready "to execute every arbitrary mandate of their despotic masters . . . Robberies, rapes, murders, etc. will be but the wanton sport of such wretches without restraint let loose upon us." Those who dared resist would be killed by "their murdering hands." If "taken captive," they would be dragged "to the place of execution."¹⁸

Such claims about the cruelty of popish soldiery would have been familiar to those who listened to the Declaration's accusation that the King was sending mercenaries "to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation," who would heard similar stories about the deeds of other Catholic soldiers, be they French, Spanish, or Irish. Particularly influential in Anglo-American were accounts of the Irish Rebellion of 1641, especially Sir John Temple's *Irish Rebellion*, excerpts from which were published anonymously in Boston in 1753 with the subtitle of *Popish Cruelty Displayed*. The book advertised itself as providing "a full and true account of the bloody and hellish massacre in Ireland, perpetrated by the instigation of the Jesuits, priests and fryars, who were the chief promoters of those horrible murthers, unheard of cruelties, barbarous villanies, and inhuman

practices, executed by the Irish Papists upon the English Protestants, in the year 1641.” It was dedicated “To all haters of Popery, by what Names or Titles soever dignified or distinguished.”¹⁹

The “merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions” is especially reminiscent of anti-Irish anti-popery, but it had a distinct American vintage as well. One influential proponent was John Adams’ neighbor in Braintree, Massachusetts, the octogenarian minister, Harvard graduate, and sometime-slaveholder Samuel Niles, who drafted a “Summary Historical Narrative of the Wars in New England with the French and Indians” that, as Niles explained to the young John Adams, was chronicling, “all the slaughter and bloodshed committed by [the French and Indians] that I could find, from the beginning [the Pequot War of 1636-38] to this day” (Niles stopped writing in 1761 and died in 1762). Niles blamed the French for encouraging Native Americans “to root out and destroy the English settlements” by supplying them with arms and ammunition, using Jesuits to instigate them, and even teaching them the art of scalping. He hoped his history might “be made, through grace, effectual to awaken, reform, and quicken us to our duty, civil and religious.” Recalling the conversation many years later, Adams believed the still unpublished manuscript “might be of great value to this country.”²⁰

Despite the prominence of religious leaders in promoting and expounding anti-popery, it becomes clear that lay people had absorbed their message when one sees them responding to moments of stress like the Quebec Act, and for them there was no difference between the religious and political consequences of popery. George Washington, usually extremely laconic on the topic of religion, lamented that “those from whom we have a right to seek protection are endeavouring by every piece of Art and despotism to fix the Shackles of Slavery upon us.” Alexander Hamilton, also very tight lipped on religious matters, believed it showed that Parliament was not “friends to the Protestant cause” and warned against trusting “men who are capable of such an action! They may as well establish Popery in New York, and the other colonies, as they did in Canada.”²¹

While the “negative imagery of popery” can at times seem hysterically unreasonable, its real significance lies in what it reveals about anti-papists “positive image of themselves,” as Peter Lake, the most influential analyst of early modern English anti-popery has pointed out.²² In this sense anti-popery was a fundamental part of the American Revolutionaries’ ideology of liberty. Recognizing its presence in the Declaration can help us understand its profound appeal to revolutionary Americans, especially the many of them who had not read the works of Locke, Vattel, or Montesquieu.

While some historians, like Tim Harris, insist that anti-popery and anti-Catholicism should be kept apart, my inclination is to see anti-Catholicism and anti-popery as essentially the same ideology, with anti-Catholicism a subset of the larger (because it applies to more different kinds of people and issues) category of anti-popery. Both use the same language of virtue, corruption, ignorance, slavery, and tyranny – something they also share with classical Republicanism. For this reason, I am less inclined to draw distinctions between these different modes of thought than intellectual historians or scholars of political thought. After all, they all coexisted together in the same minds. Key figures of early American Republicanism like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison are generally not associated with anti-Catholicism, but there is plenty of evidence that they shared its basic premises, even if they were not as virulent in applying them as New Englanders like John Adams. In other words, not all early American anti-papists were classical Republicans, but all early American classical Republicans were anti-papists, and most of them were anti-Catholic as well. The distinction is important, for many of the Roman Catholics in America who supported the Revolution were anti-papists but obviously not anti-Catholics.²³

In sum, when we see a Patriot praising liberty or denouncing tyranny, or yearning for virtue while abhorring corruption, there is not much point in trying to figure out whether those words are referring to the Protestant evangelical, classical Republican, anti-Catholic, or anti-papist part of their brain. They were all intermixed – and becoming more deliberately so in the

run up to the Declaration. Thus, David Jones, a Baptist minister from New Jersey preaching to an audience in Pennsylvania in 1775 to buck up their will to fight for their liberties, asked them, after summarizing some of the staples of English anti-papery like the Glorious Revolution that ousted the Catholic King James II, “what better is Protestant tyranny than popish? Is there any essential difference between being robbed by a Protestant or a Papist? Is it not the very same thing? Tyranny is tyranny, slavery is slavery, by whomever it is imposed. Names change not the nature of things. If despotism is bad in a papist, it cannot be good in a protestant. If it may be resisted in one, it ought to be in the other.”²⁴

The Declaration picked up on this widespread effort to label King George a tyrant. His hostility to representative government is understandable because the right of representation is “a right . . . formidable to tyrants only.” A King who also disregarded the laws, as the Declaration’s first three clauses insist, could only be a “Prince, whose character is . . . marked by every act which may define a Tyrant” and so “unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

Anti-papery was an international Protestant ideology shared by all sorts of different Protestants across Europe. However, for the colonists who would fight in the Revolution, it was central to their idea of what it meant to be English – in short, their national identity. One of the key problems they confronted in the lead up to 1776 was that their sense of Englishness remained rooted in the seventeenth century, while most people in England, especially those closest to the levers of power, had moved to a more nuanced, perhaps Enlightened, and less militantly Protestant concept of what it meant to be British. They viewed the eighteenth-century world through a different, more modern national lens. Like most modern Americans, conservatives like Samuel Johnson could not help but wonder, “how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” When John Adams insisted that the American patriots were not “Negroes” but people “as handsome as old English folks, and so should be as free” he was not merely being racist; he was redirecting the conversation back to its seventeenth century English roots. For revolutionaries like Adams, English liberty was a Protestant value that had emerged out

of centuries of resistance to the “ecclesiastical and civil tyranny” of “the Romish clergy” and “the Princes of Europe,” both driven by “the same purposes of tyranny, cruelty and lust.” This explanation, when published as his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, struck his otherwise sympathetic London editor as “very curious.”²⁵

The American Revolution was a nationalist revolt – an *English* nationalist revolt. “America” was still no more than a geographic expression like the Mid-West or California. Notably, it only appears in the Declaration as a geographic reference point to where the “thirteen united States” are located. The Declaration’s national identity remains British. It praises the British for “their native justice and magnanimity” and emphasizes “the ties of our common kindred” while expressing disappointment that they “have been deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity.” When it declared Americans “separate” from Britain, it was only to put them on the “equal station” with their “British brethren” that they felt they had always deserved.

Studies of American nationalism start in 1776 or some point thereafter and restrict themselves to those “thirteen united States.” Everyone recognizes that Americans identified as English and British before 1776, but we have not yet figured out how to bridge the transition from the one to the other. For me, anti-papery provides the crucial link. Anti-papery allowed them to make a drastic change in their identity while believing they were simply preserving the way they had always been. Indeed, anti-papery was as strong in America after 1776 as before, even though attitudes and policies towards Roman Catholics ameliorated and their relationship to being British became more complicated.²⁶

Partha Chatterjee, the noted historian of Indian nationalism, argues in *The Nation and its Fragments* that, before taking on the British Empire, anti-colonialist nationalists first built a sovereign sphere within the spiritual realm. While there are many obvious differences from the American case, the idea of first imagining a nation into being through the spiritual dimension is instructive. One can see it in the aspects of national identity highlighted by the Declaration. The “circumstances of our emigration and settlement here” references the (false) idea that most

Anglo-Americans became colonists to escape religious persecution in England. The Declaration's openness to immigration necessary for "the population of these States," evident in the complaint that king was "obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners," and interfering with "their migrations hither" refers to free Protestant Europeans, like Huguenots or German Lutherans, who were the sort of people British Americans knew could be fairly easily assimilated into their society. The Declaration's praise for "the free System of English laws" that were abolished in Quebec is also praise for what was at times a very anti-Catholic law code. Across the colonies since 1688, Roman Catholics had been barred from holding public office, serving on juries, and subject to various punitive taxes and laws. This "Imagined Community" was very different from the form of nationalism famously proposed by Benedict Anderson, who linked it to print capitalism and the rapid spread of books and other printed materials in the eighteenth century. For Americans, it had been fostered from the beginning through the expansive sort of a public sphere developed by early modern English historians, which includes a much wider variety of materials (manuscripts, ballads, sermons) and sites (parades, public executions, festivals like "Pope's Day", and even games like "break the Pope's neck" that a young man from New Jersey played with the guests at the Carter plantation in Virginia during Christmas in 1773).²⁷

Recently, Peter Lake has suggested that one key reason for the outbreak of the English Civil War was competing conspiracy theories: both sides had a compelling intellectual framework for analyzing the actions of the other, not in terms of actual intent, but in terms of expected outcome. The anti-popish puritans anticipated the monarchy would trend towards tyranny while the anti-puritan monarchy anticipated that its critics were aiming at the overthrow of the established order. In the highly polarized run up to the outbreak of war, each theory provided a powerful capacity for make sense of the other side's actions. Neither left room for misunderstandings, negotiation, or compromise. As a result, the more each responded to the other, the more they stumbled towards Civil War.²⁸

One sees something similar in the origins of the American Revolution. The Patriots, imbued with the strong anti-popery that had fueled the puritans' embrace of Civil War, interpreted the actions of the King-in-Parliament as a "long train of abuses and usurpations" designed "to reduce" colonists "under absolute Despotism" and accuses the King of "repeated injuries and usurpations" aimed at "the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States." The King and his Parliamentary supporters, on the other hand, followed the anti-puritan logic of his ancestor Charles I.

That logic is evident in King George's opening speech to the new Parliament convening on October 26, 1775. He insisted that the problem was a group of individuals, certain "authors and promoters of" a "desperate conspiracy" to initiate a rebellion that "is manifestly carried on for the purpose of establishing an independent Empire." They had "long too successfully laboured to inflame my people in America, by gross misrepresentations, and to infuse into their minds a system of opinions repugnant to the true constitution of the Colonies, and to their subordinate relation to Great Britain." Assuming the powers of government, which "they already exercise in the most arbitrary manner over the persons and properties of their fellow-subjects. They "have raised troops" and "now openly avow their revolt, hostility, and rebellion." George believed that "many of these unhappy people may still retain their loyalty, and may be too wise not to see the fatal consequence of this usurpation, and wish to resist it," but "the torrent of violence has been strong enough to compel their acquiescence till a sufficient force shall appear to support them." To help them, and to remind them that "to be a subject of Great Britain, with all its consequences, is to be the freest member of any civil society in the known world," he explained his plans for "suppressing" the "present disorders" in America with military force.²⁹

This anti-puritan logic can also be seen in Viscount Townshend's loyal response. Townshend agreed that the "desperate men" leading the opposition to the Ministry's policies had "deluded . . . our unhappy fellow-subjects in America" and pushed them "into measures no less subversive of their own happiness and true interests, than dangerous to the prosperity and safety

of Great Britain.” Between “the powers which they have assumed, and the arbitrary and oppressive acts which they have done,” they “leave no doubt of their traitorous purpose,” Townshend insisted. Their “real design” was “to induce the Colonies to shake off the control of the Supreme Legislature, and to bury in an ungrateful oblivion the remembrance of the great industry with which they have been planted, the fostering care with which they have been nursed, the many advantages which they have enjoyed, and the expense of blood and treasure with which they have been protected by this nation.” Viscount Dudley, asserting “the sovereign authority of the British Legislature over every part of the British dominions,” seconded the motion. He “contended that the present rebellion in America was fomented and supported by a desperate faction in this country [England]; that none but men of the worst dispositions, and most pernicious designs, would encourage the claims of America.”³⁰

As if to further highlight the difference in mentality between the Patriots and their opponents in the ministry, Townshend also went out of his way to argue that “it was extremely proper, in the present exigency of affairs, to take foreigners into our pay, and Irish papists into our service.” Insisting that “papists might be as good soldiers as any other,” he pointed out that even France, “however bigoted or despotick she might be in other respects, made no difference between Protestants and Catholics.” Moreover, “the Hollanders acted in the same manner.” Both countries agreed “that so men were good soldiers, it was very little matter what their creeds were.” Such pragmatically tolerant attitudes had supported the Quebec Act that had so incensed the Patriots.³¹

The parallelism between the anti-Patriot and Patriot accounts of the reasons for war and Independence are striking. Although they came to different conclusions, they came out of the same shared British Protestant political discourse. Neither version persuaded the other side, but each laid out a justification that appealed to their supporters who, equally immersed within this Anglo-American Protestant political cultural permeated with conspiratorial thinking, chose the conspiratorial logic that best represented their attitudes and interests.

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- ¹ The number of books alone on the Declaration is remarkable -- and currently, in response to the 250th anniversary, growing exponentially. My summary remarks draw on what I've been able to learn about the following books, several of which are coming out as I write this paper and so can't be properly consulted yet: Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1922); J. R. Pole, *The Decision for American Independence* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1975); Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2018; original edition 1978); Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); I. B. Cohen, *Science and the Founding Fathers: Science in the Political Thought of Jefferson, Franklin, Adams and Madison* (New York, 1995); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); William Hoagland, *Declaration: The Nine Tumultuous Weeks when America became Independent, May 1 – July 4, 1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011); Joseph J. Ellis, *The Great Contradiction: The Tragic Side of the American Founding* (New York: Knopf, 2015); Danielle S. Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (Liveright, 2015); C. Bradley Thompson, *America's Revolutionary Mind: A Moral History of the American Revolution and the Declaration that Defined it* (Encounter Books, 2019); Robert G. Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and made the Declaration of Independence* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2021); Edward J. Larson, *Declaring Independence: Why 1776 Matters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2025); Matthew Spalding, *The Making of the American Mind: The Story of our Declaration of Independence* (Encounter Books, 2025); Timothy Sandefur, *Proclaiming Liberty: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and the Declaration of Independence* (Cato Institute, 2026); Bradley J. Birzer, *The Declaration of Independence: A Radical Experiment in Liberty* (Stone House Press, 2026); Michael Auslin, *National Treasure: How the Declaration of Independence made America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2026); Robert G. Parkinson, *Tyrants and Rogues: Understanding the Declaration of Independence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2026).
- ² Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-2.
- ³ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1992, original edition 1967); Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39:3 (1982): 401-441.
- ⁴ The most notable proponents of this argument are Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1999) and Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2016).
- ⁵ Maier, *American Scripture*, xvii, xviii.
- ⁶ Tim Harris, "Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Popery in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 26-27, 33-34.
- ⁷ Samuel Sherwood, *The Church's Flight into the Wilderness: An Address on the Times. Containing some very interesting and important observations on Scripture prophecies: shewing, that sundry of them plainly related to Great-Britain, and the American Colonies; and are fulfilling in the present day* (New York, 1776), Introduction, np, 9.
- ⁸ Cotton Mather, *Eleutheria: or, An idea of the Reformation in England* (London, 1698), 4, 6, 11, 59-60. A more recent version of this ideology can be discerned in Matthew Avery Sutton, "Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamentalist Antiliberalism in a Global Age," *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (2012), 1052-1074.
- ⁹ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 33, 90-95; Sherwood, *Church's Flight into the Wilderness*, 14, 15.

- ¹⁰ *A Remonstrance of the State of the Kingdom* (London, 1641), 4-6. See also Michelle Orihel, “‘All Those Truly Acquainted with the History of Those Times’: John Adams and the Opposition Politics of Revolutionary England, ca. 1640-1641,” *New England Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (September 2013): 433-466.
- ¹¹ Evan Haefeli, “Anti-Catholicism in Colonial Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 132, no. 4 (2024), 270; “Notes of a Tour through Holland and the Rhine Valley, 3 March 1788,” *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* [need full citation!].
- ¹² Haefeli, “Anti-Catholicism in Colonial Virginia,” 271. *Washington: A Collection*, 39. This quote incidentally is one of the only I have yet found that makes a direct connection between the slavery of popery and the slavery imposed on people of African heritage in colonial America. The vast majority of the time, when Revolutionaries talked about slavery, they were referring to the former, not the latter.
- ¹³ “Sermon preached at evening meeting February 20, 1737,” f. 4, Folder April 18 1727, Feb 1737, Box Stephen Williams, Sermons, 1727-1803, Massachusetts Historical Society; Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769), Book 4, Chapter 8, “On Praemunire.”
- ¹⁴ Indeed, King George III would not entirely disagree with this assessment. In 1807, when a bill was introduced in Parliament to allow Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters to serve openly in the army and navy, he responded that he would rather “quit my throne and retire to a cottage, or to place my neck upon a block on a scaffold, if my People required it” rather than break his coronation oath promising to “maintain and preserve inviolably the said settlement of the Church of England and the doctrine, worship, discipline and government thereof as by law established.” A similar toleration had been granted in Ireland in 1793, but this Bill was for England, where George drew a line he did not draw elsewhere, although he had invoked his oath when preventing Catholic Emancipation in Ireland after the Union of 1800, https://www.stgeorges-windsor.org/image_of_the_month/king-george-iii-respects-an-oath/
- ¹⁵ *To the People of Great Britain from the Delegates appointed by the Several English Colonies . . . to Consider their Grievances in General Congress* (London, 1775), 4, 13-16.
- ¹⁶ For the case that New England’s puritans might have been up to such mischief, see Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁷ Susan M. Kingsbury, ed. *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* 4 vols. (1906-1935), 4:194-195.
- ¹⁸ Samuel Sherwood, *A Sermon, containing Scriptural Instructions to civil rulers . . . Also, an appendix . . . By Rev. Ebenezer Baldwin* (New Haven, 1774), 13, 67, 72, 74.
- ¹⁹ [Sir John Temple], *Popish Cruelty Displayed . . .* (Boston, 1753), 3. See also Evan Haefeli, “Barbarians and Papists: Anti-popery, Ireland, and British-America, 1536-1775,” in *Against Popery*, 91-129.
- ²⁰ John Adams to William Tudor, Sr., 23 September, 1818, *Founders Online* <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6993>. Quotes from Niles’ history in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd. Ser., vol. 6, (1837) 154-5, 157 and *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 4th Ser., vol. 5, (1861), 336, 387. For Niles’ biography, see Clifford K. Shipton et al., eds. *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, vol. 4, *Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes 1690-1700*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), 485-491.
- ²¹ *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 31; Richard B. Vernier, ed. *The Revolutionary Writings of Alexander Hamilton* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), 30.
- ²² Peter Lake, “Anti-popery: The Structure of a Prejudice,” in *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics, 1603-1642*, eds. Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (New York, 1989), 72-106.
- ²³ For more on this theme, see my discussion in the Introduction and Conclusion to *Against Popery*.
- ²⁴ David Jones, *Defensive War in a Just Cause Sinless. A sermon, preached on the day of the continental fast, at Tredyffryn, in Chester County, by the Revd. David Jones, A.M. Published by Request* (Philadelphia, 1775), 15-16.
- ²⁵ Samuel Johnson, *Taxation no Tyranny* (1775), 79, 89; *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 31, 39; *The True Sentiments of America* (London, 1768), 114, 115, 117, 118; T. H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions once more in need of Revising,” *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997): 13-39, esp. 29-38, which includes the Adams quote. Breen’s discussion of the revolutionaries’ fears of slavery links it to John Locke but ignores anti-popery.
- ²⁶ Key examples include David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism* (1997); Kariann Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America became a Postcolonial Nation* (2011); John Murrin, “A Roof without Walls: The Dilemma of American National

Identity,” in John Murrin, ed. *Rethinking America: From Empire to Republic* (2018), 187-203; Jasper Trautsch, *Genesis of America: U.S. Foreign Policy & the Formation of National Identity* (2018).

²⁷ Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters, 1767-1774*, ed. John Rogers Williams (Princeton, 1900), 65. Relevant scholarship includes Partha Chaterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983); Karen Auman, “‘English Liberties’ and German Settlers in Colonial America: The Georgia Salzburgers’ Conceptions of Community, 1730-1750,” *Early American Studies* 11, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 37-54; Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, eds. *The Politics of the Public Sphere in early modern England* (2007); Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (2007); Michael D. Hattem, *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (2020).

²⁸ Peter Lake, “Post-Reformation Politics, or on Not Looking for the Long-Term Causes of the English Civil War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the English Revolution*, ed. Michael J. Braddick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 21-42.

²⁹ Peter Force, ed. *American Archives*, 4th Ser., 6 Vols (Washington D.C., 1833-1846), 6:1-2.

³⁰ Force 6:3-4.

³¹ Force 6:3.