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# The courtship of providence and patriotism: the founders' perceptions of American religion

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THE COURTSHIP OF PROVIDENCE AND PATRIOTISM:  
THE FOUNDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICAN RELIGION

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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Spencer Welles McBride  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the religious language used by America's Revolutionary leadership, particularly regarding days of fasting and prayer, the appointment of chaplains to the Continental Army, and the practice praying in the Continental Congress. These three occurrences indicate the presence of religious thought in the prosecution of the American Revolution and the establishment of an American nation. But it is an oversimplification to draw the conclusion that the founding of the United States was religious in nature simply because religious thought was involved in the process. Examining these three acts reveals the complex association of religious and political rhetoric, and at the same time helps to make sense of public religious expressions made by America's political leadership in the Revolutionary context. By analyzing the language surrounding the proclamation of fast days, the appointment of chaplains, and the offering of prayer in Congress, we can achieve a better understanding of the role religion played in promoting a patriotic identity and securing a greater sense of American nationhood.

In proclaiming fast days, appointing chaplains, and participating in congressional prayer, America's Revolutionary leadership utilized the language of American providentialism, the belief that God intervened in the affairs of mankind and that America was ordained by God to play a pivotal role in that plan. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the founders' public use of religious rhetoric, particularly that of providentialism, reveals less about the founders' personal religious beliefs and more about how they perceived the religiosity of their constituents. The founders' use of religious language to illicit a

patriotic response from Americans indicates that they perceived most Americans possessed a non-secular, essentially Christian worldview.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

How and why was a religious vocabulary employed by the United Colonies—not yet the United States—in the critical months after the Battles of Lexington and Concord put America on a path to independence? Over three days in June 1775, the Continental Congress debated both the merits and language of its first proclamation to be aimed directly at the American people. It proposed a day of fasting and prayer to “be observed by the inhabitants of all the English Colonies on [the North American] continent.”<sup>1</sup> The momentous proclamation cast the war with Great Britain in terms that Congress thought would resonate with the majority of the American people—religious terms. To what extent was God on the minds of the delegates? To what extent was it an appreciation for the art of publicity and the power of persuasion that led them to the fast day proclamation?

The Continental Army was officially established by Congress only one month before the fast day proclamation. The army was growing in size and its unruly ranks were in need of discipline and training. To address the problem, many in Congress took up the study of war, reading books on tactical formation and strategy, as they debated among themselves how to prosecute a war against what was then the most powerful military force in the world. Over the course of that war, Congress proposed a variety of methods of obtaining greater discipline among the troops both on and off the battlefield, increasing the number of initial enlistments and reenlistments, and decreasing the number of desertions. Included alongside tactical proposals were ruminations on the potential

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<sup>1</sup> “Resolution for a Fast,” 12 June 1775, Worthington C. Ford et al., eds., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 34 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1904-37), 2:87.

effectiveness of chaplains. Delegates were convinced that religious instruction would go far to transform a group of “rabble in arms” into a professional army. Most importantly, chaplains were seen to be performing a morale-building role, keeping soldiers interested in staying in the war. Congressional appointments of chaplains held symbolic authority as well, reinforcing the image of a modern “Army of Israel” with a cause equally as just and divinely appointed as that described in the Old Testament.

While the decision to appoint chaplains to the army required little debate, the appointment of chaplains to minister and pray in Congress presented a more complex scenario. The issue was debated in 1774 on just the second day the Continental Congress was in session. Because the delegates were so divided in their religious beliefs and backgrounds, some delegates felt that they could not worship together as a unified body. However, a compromise was eventually reached: a clergyman’s political disposition was deemed more important than his religious denomination. Jacob Duché was appointed chaplain to the Congress and from that point on, congressional prayer was regularly spoken. Some of these prayers were recited from a denomination’s prayer book, while others were individualized, being composed or offered extemporaneously by the chaplain. In either case, delegates were careful to ensure that congressional prayer reflected the multi-denominational backgrounds of their constituents; the practice was not only intended to promote civil discourse among the delegates, but also to portray Congress as a political body aiming to do God’s will.

These three occurrences: days of fasting, the appointment of chaplains to the army, and congressional prayer, indicate the presence of religious thought in the prosecution of the American Revolution and the establishment of an American nation.

But it is an oversimplification to draw the conclusion that the founding of the United States was religious in nature simply because religious thought was involved in the process. A careful study of these three acts reveals the complex association of religious and political rhetoric, and at the same time helps to make sense of public religious expressions made by America's political leadership in the Revolutionary context. By analyzing the language surrounding the proclamation of fast days, the appointment of chaplains, and the offering of prayer in Congress, we can achieve a better understanding of the role religion played in promoting a patriotic identity and securing a greater sense of American nationhood.

Historians frequently cite the founders' public statements mixing religious rhetoric with political arguments. Such work tends to have a polarizing effect in the unending debate over whether America was a Christian nation at the time of its founding. The Christian Nation debate, in reality, consists of two different approaches to the same question. One approach attempts to ascertain the devoutness of the general population. The other hopes to find Christian elements in government institutions, notably focusing on the "original intent" of the founders in promoting a separation of church and state.

Both approaches look to religious rhetoric to support their claims. Historians who focus on the institutional side of the debate will categorize the founders as either devout Christians or unbelievers whose expressions of faith were disingenuous; this is meant to explain whether or not the institutions they founded were religiously inspired. On the social side of the debate, their constituents' religiosity matters more than any measure of the Christian values of their chosen leaders. Both lines of reasoning are easily subject to manipulation on the part of the researcher.

This does not mean that the religious statements made by the founders are void of meaning other than that ascribed to them by historians. Once removed from the tainting influence of present-day partisanship, and considered strictly in the context in which they were expressed, the founders' religious rhetoric can actually shed light on the Christian Nation debate.

When Congress communicated its purposes to the Continental Army and to the American people more broadly, it intentionally included providential language and biblical symbolism. This was done to inspire greater patriotism, by framing the conflict with Great Britain in familiar terms. The national leadership depicted their time as a watershed era in the realization of God's plan, and America as a moral exemplar for others around the world. The founders were confident that the American people adhered to an essentially non-sectarian Christian worldview.

## Chapter 2: Ideological Underpinnings

The idea of providence frames nearly all religious rhetoric associated with fast day proclamations, the appointment of Chaplains, and congressional prayer. Yet the ways in which Americans understood and described the nature and scope of God's intervention in human affairs never remained static. The meaning of "providence" differed according to time and place.

Broadly defined, providence is the idea that God plays an active role in mundane affairs for the accomplishment of an overarching plan. Samuel Johnson succinctly defined the term in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* as "the care of God over created beings."<sup>1</sup> Providential thought, or providentialism, includes attempts to detect supernatural intervention both in the past and present. While by no means a novel concept of the eighteenth century, nor unique to America, the Revolutionary moment exhibited unique characteristics.

In his book, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815*, John F. Berens argues that from the early colonial period through the early national period of American history, Americans constantly viewed themselves as "inhabitants of a nation specially chosen, protected, and guided by Almighty God."<sup>2</sup> In tracing the history of providential thought in America, he shows how the idea went from being primarily a belief held by Puritan New Englanders to an idea used throughout the colonies by the time of the Seven Years War to justify violence and insure victory over the "papist"

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755), 180.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 13.

French and “heathen” Indians. Berens proceeds to explain how this application of providential thought to patriotism persisted over subsequent decades, as the colonists rationalized fighting their political parent and then contended for control of the national government as adherents of two rival parties. Ultimately, Berens includes all “the concepts that were either imparted to early American patriotism by religion or originated elsewhere but were tremendously reinforced by religious images,”<sup>3</sup> as elements of providential thought.

Nicholas Guyatt’s *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* is a recent and exceedingly thorough analysis of American providential thought. His central premise does not differ drastically from Berens, but the book extends the history and influence of the idea of American providentialism fifty years. Guyatt divides the idea of providentialism into two distinct categories: “personal providentialism,” or God’s dealings with individuals, and “national providentialism,” or God’s dealings with nations. He explains that after the English Civil War, Americans and Britons alike began to view personal providentialism as superstitious while still clinging to the belief that the fate of nations was determined by God.<sup>4</sup> Guyatt includes millennial themes in his description of national providentialism as he describes “how many Americans came to argue that their history and their nation were uniquely favored by God and shaped for the political and moral redemption of the world.”<sup>5</sup> Guyatt argues that American providentialism provided

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 8.

the building blocks of nationalism that unified the colonists during the Revolution, as measured by the prevalent use of providential rhetoric both to define the merits of an independent United States and to contrast American “virtue” with European “corruption.”<sup>6</sup>

Like Berens, Guyatt sees the Puritan call for a “city on a hill” in preparation for Christ’s second coming as an essential precursor to the development of a thoroughgoing American providentialism distinct from that of the English. But Guyatt demonstrates its presence outside of New England at an earlier date than Berens does. Guyatt alone identifies commercial factors in the idea’s evolution, citing businessmen who went about selling colonial Virginia as both a moral and profitable venture while simultaneously criticizing the “greedy” and “sinful” quests for profit in Spain’s colonies. In this construction, America was a land with a special purpose for the spreading of Christianity, and thus Guyatt demonstrates how American providentialism was shaped by economic factors as well as the more obvious religious and cultural elements.<sup>7</sup>

The broader idea of providentialism subsumed the aforementioned millennialism. Millennialism is the idea that human history is divinely ordained and will lead to a period of heavenly perfection on earth.”<sup>8</sup> Like providentialism, millennial thought was not unique to America, or even to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The belief in a forthcoming utopian period to follow the second coming of Christ spread along with

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 18-23.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xi.

Christianity in the first and second centuries. When new examinations of the Bible occurred during the Protestant Reformation, millennialism experienced an increase in popularity and interpretive adaptation. Some, for instance, began to teach that the millennium may not have to coincide with the Second Coming, but could be ushered in by the universal acceptance of Christian principles. Whether by the actual Second Coming or by the triumph of Christian principles, the millennium was the happy conclusion to human history toward which all of God's intervention in the earthly affairs of men and nations was directed. Thus, millennialism is the specific aspect of providentialism that explained the ultimate purpose for God's interposition.

The literature of American millennialism owes most to Ruth Bloch's *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800*, and Henry F. May's *The Enlightenment in America*.<sup>9</sup> Bloch broadly defines millennialism as "the idea that human history is divinely ordained and will lead to a period of heavenly perfection on earth." Bloch explains what made Americans' attachment to millennialism pronounced: the recently settled continent was destined to play a pivotal role in the realization of this "period of perfection," either as the physical site of the prophesied New Israel or as the champion of freedom destined to free the rest of the world from ungodly tyranny and

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<sup>9</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Additional works detailing American millennialism worth noting are Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) and Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Hatch focuses on several of the same themes as Bloch and May, but limits his study to New England. Tuveson describes millennialism as the clearest expression of the "Christian optimism about the future of humanity and human society," that arose in the seventeenth century and continues into the present. While he discusses the origins of millennialism, the majority of the book is dedicated to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its contributions to American society and politics in the eighteenth century is surpassed by Bloch's *Visionary Republic* in thoroughness and persuasiveness.

oppression. She traces the origins of America's version of millennialism to the Puritans, and to the widespread revivals of the Great Awakening. Bloch is careful to note how millennialism differed by region, religious denomination, and time period but that in the confrontations of the mid-1770s "the view that "British tyranny was the Antichrist, the view that America was intended to usher in the Kingdom of God, [and] the view that the latter days were near at hand" were fully combined into a single revolutionary millennial vision.<sup>10</sup>

May focuses on intellectual development amid a "Revolutionary Enlightenment," a time he designates by "the belief in the possibility of constructing a new heaven and earth out of the destruction of the old."<sup>11</sup> May characterizes the Revolutionary Enlightenment as one that is not merely compatible with religion but itself "enthusiastic and religious in spirit."<sup>12</sup> To Americans influenced by this current, millennialism and its connection to broader ideas of American providentialism obligated the people of 1776 to, as Thomas Paine exclaimed, "begin the world anew."<sup>13</sup>

The works of Bloch and May represent a movement among scholars since the late 1960s which argued against earlier scholars who insisted upon a completely secularized American political culture.<sup>14</sup> The present study does not deviate from the argument of

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<sup>10</sup>Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 74.

<sup>11</sup> May, *The Enlightenment in America*, xvi, 153-155.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), 1:45.

<sup>14</sup> The history and a list of several participants in this movement are in Berens, *Providence and Patriotism*, 2.

Bloch and May, in the sense that it shows how America's Revolutionary leadership believed religious thought, language, and symbolism were front and center in Americans' view of their immediate prospects.

In keeping with these scholars, our working definition of American providentialism is as follows: 1) the idea that God intervenes in the affairs of mankind; 2) the belief that the course of human events would eventually lead to a period of peace; and 3) that America, both the land and its inhabitants, was ordained to play a special role in the realization of that plan. As Berens, Guyatt, Bloch and May have all shown, the implications of providential thought shifted as Americans sought to explain how they and the tumultuous events surrounding them fit into God's master plan. The founders intentionally, and often quite impressively, tailored their language and heightened imagery in order to make the American Revolution more than a war for political independence—it was a consequential idea and a divinely ordained plan destined to affect all humanity.

The historiography of fast days, military chaplains, and congressional prayer consists primarily of two books, plus numerous others that add brief commentary on these subjects. James H. Hutson's *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* and Derek H. Davis' *Religion and the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* both offer persuasive accounts.<sup>15</sup> Yet neither really explores the political motivations and debates attending religious utterances and pronouncements or the language associated with them.

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<sup>15</sup> James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1998); Derek H. Davis, *Religion and the Continental Congress, 1774-1789: Contributions to Original Intent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Furthermore, both attempt to draw conclusions that bear on present debates about the relationship between church and state (the conclusions reached by Davis are explicit in this regard, while those of Hutson are merely implied).

Hutson wrote *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* as an accompanying resource for an exhibit by the same name developed by the Library of Congress. The book focuses on the relation of religion and government during the founding period, particularly in the Continental Congress. Hutson argues that Congress invested great energy “in encouraging the practice of religion throughout the new nation, energy that far exceeded the amount expended by any subsequent American national government.”<sup>16</sup> His analysis of fast days, chaplaincies, and congressional prayer follows this prescription.

Hutson looks at the specific language used by Congress in proclaiming days of fasting and prayer, but he does so to show how such language urged colonists to repent of their individual and national sins, to attend church, and to aid in the spread Christianity. Though he comments on how the language of the proclamations reflects providential thought (which he refers to simply as the “covenant theology”), it is in order to establish that “for a deeply religious society to produce deeply religious leaders is no surprise.”<sup>17</sup> He argues that the appointment of chaplains was an effort to preserve morality in the army and to promote discipline, a contention he supports by invoking the Articles of War adopted and repeatedly revised by Congress. He discusses this situation only briefly,

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<sup>16</sup> Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

however. As for prayers offered in Congress during the Revolution, he mentions these as evidence of Congress's collective piety, while noting that the practice was no longer followed in federal legislative bodies after the end of the eighteenth century.

Hutson acknowledges the political strategy in religious rhetoric, but he does not go into detail as to the strategic benefits he imagines won. Rather, he is primarily interested in showing that the members of Congress and their constituents were devoutly Christian. And while he may or may not be correct in this, his argument is suspect because he does not take into account the political motivations behind religious acts, and assumes instead that public expressions of faith emanating from a political body necessarily represented the actual beliefs of members and their constituents.

Davis's *Religion and the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* covers many of the same topics as Hutson's book, but its concern with Congress is more detailed. Davis sets out to "examine the record of the Continental Congress on religion for the purpose of discovering what that record might contribute toward a resolution of the modern debate over the original intent of the constitutional framers regarding the interplay of government and religion in the United States."<sup>18</sup> He acknowledges that "the religious dimensions of the work of the Continental Congress were in many ways a reflection of a culture dominated by Protestantism but increasingly, at least among educated elites, influenced by Enlightenment rationalism."<sup>19</sup> However, he proceeds to explain that religious policy and rhetoric reflected larger religious trends, because the congressional

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<sup>18</sup> Davis, *Religion and the Continental Congress*, 199.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

delegates shared the religious beliefs of their constituents. Davis views the founders' collective religiosity merely as a product of their environment.

The problem with this approach, like Hutson's, is that Davis does not take into account the underlying motivation of those who debated and deliberated how to frame their struggle with Great Britain in terms that would resonate most powerfully with those they represented—their primary audience. Again, this is not to say that the congressional delegates were not religious men or that their inclusion of providential rhetoric was intended merely as empty expressions and blatant propaganda. The presence of political strategy does not necessarily preclude genuine belief. It simply means that as political figures acting as a political body, all of their public actions in this capacity were inherently political. Ignoring the fullness of context and the psychological complexity of motivations generates an incomplete if not skewed picture of the delegates' actual beliefs. Davis's accounting for the religious dimension of Congress's work reflects his presumption that Congress, more or less as a rule, sought to remedy its lack of specific legislative authority by appealing to “a higher authority,” and that the seriousness of the war compelled the delegates to rely on that higher power “for guidance and assistance.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, we must probe deeper and mine the extant sources for more compelling evidence of beliefs and motivations.

Davis is correct to assert that congressionally proclaimed days of fast “served to reinforce the belief of Americans that God was acting for them,”<sup>21</sup> but he does not

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 87.

explain how the specific providential language Congress employed reinforced the idea that the colonists were fighting *for* God. While this may seem like the mere splitting of hairs over the order of words, there is a significant difference. It is one thing to say that the colonists sought to enlarge their collective confidence in the outcome of an uphill struggle by believing they had Providence on their side. But it is quite another to insist that they believed the war itself was an essential part of God's master plan for humankind. Rather than pursue his argument to its logical conclusion, Davis states multiple times that fast days proclaimed by the national government ended with the ratification of the Constitution.<sup>22</sup> While it may be true that the annual spring observance of a national fast ceased, there are numerous instances of fast days being proclaimed and observed as late as the Civil War.

In his coverage of congressional prayer, Davis offers no explanation of motives beyond the piety of the delegates and their desire to establish legitimacy through an appeal to a "higher authority." His book is a valuable source of information on the matter of religion and the Continental Congress, but its incomplete analysis makes it a flawed reading of the times.

Other historical studies discuss days of fasting and prayer in eighteenth-century America, but they tend to treat the subject only briefly.<sup>23</sup> Guyatt's aforementioned

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 89-93.

<sup>23</sup> Besides the works mentioned in the text, other examples of historical works making brief reference to fast days in support of larger arguments outside of discussions of American religion include Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 60-61 and David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

*Providence and the Invention of the United States*, refers to the observance of fast days as examples of government bodies using providential themes to advance political goals.<sup>24</sup>

Ruth Bloch's *Visionary Republic* mentions fast days only to identify millennial themes in the fast day proclamations of individual states.<sup>25</sup>

Though Hutson and Davis each pay a fair amount of attention to the appointment of military chaplains, Charles Royster's *A Revolutionary People at War* offers the most thorough account of life in the Continental Army and the effects of an evolving set of American values on the army's creation and development.<sup>26</sup> Royster argues that "Religious and political appeals to the soldier combined the forces of the two most powerful prevailing explanations by which revolutionaries understood events."<sup>27</sup> Hutson and Davis note how Congress stressed the appointment of chaplains to effect greater discipline and morality among the troops, but Royster adds another dimension in demonstrating how the appointment of chaplains was of a piece with the religious symbolism inherent in various policies and practices; as part of a larger strategy to promote martial discipline, the appointment of chaplains was meant to prove that the Continental Army had a purpose and destiny similar to that of the "Army of Israel" described in the Old Testament.<sup>28</sup> When defeat in battle or the troops' immoral conduct

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<sup>24</sup> Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 96, 105, 116-21.

<sup>25</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 79.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-126, 152-189. The comparison to the Army of Israel is the main topic of chapters one and three.

put that ideal in question, Royster observed that the chaplains had to remain “spokesmen for the promise.”<sup>29</sup>

Very few historical studies focus on congressional prayer. Besides the aforementioned writings of Hutson and Davis, historians’ coverage of the subject is limited to passing mentions that the practice occurred or brief accounts of particular occasions when prayer was spoken in Congress. But at best, such works offer superficial explanations of Congressional prayer’s significance. There is sufficient enough evidence to require an examination of congressional prayer in relation to the promotion of civil discourse or the use of symbolism in a variety of social measures. Indeed, as elusive as it might be, an explanation or explanations for the significance and meaning of prayer to Revolutionary Americans in general needs to be thoroughly pursued.

The mere fact that Congress proclaimed fast days, appointed chaplains, and regularly prayed in congressional sessions does not tell us much about early American religion. These were all common occurrences in Europe. The difference between American fast days, military chaplains, and congressional prayer and their European equivalents is the intellectual and political context in which these actions were taken and the nuanced language in which they were described. Thus, *how* and *why* America’s Revolutionary leadership took such action becomes an important indicator of how it perceived American religiosity at the time of the country’s founding.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 168.

### Chapter 3: Days of Fasting and Prayer

In June 1775, the American colonies had done little to justify the name “United Colonies.” Each colony had jealously guarded its autonomy, relying on local militia to protect its borders and local officials to make and enforce laws. When the Continental Congress was formed to coordinate resistance to taxation by Parliament, the task of unifying the inhabitants of the disparate colonies became crucial to their success. The first attempt by Congress aimed at colonial unity was its proclamation of a day of fasting and prayer. John Adams envisioned millions “on their knees at once before their Great Creator, imploring...his Smiles on American Councils and Arms,” and believed the fast day would prompt the clergy to “engage with a fervor that will produce wonderful effects.”<sup>1</sup>

Congress stood to gain clear political advantages from the widespread observance of a fast day. It would serve to unite the colonists in religious worship and to create for Congress an effective channel of communication with their constituents by mobilizing an “army” of clergymen to more effectively lead their congregations to perceive resistance to Great Britain as just. But the most important advantages to be gained were ideological. To encourage participation by as many colonists as possible, the fast day had to be publicized in terms that transcended the doctrinal differences of denominations. Toward this end, Congress utilized the language of American providentialism, effectively framing their war with Great Britain in religious terms that made their success

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<sup>1</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, June 11 and 17, 1775, *Adams Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>. (Henceforth *AFP*).

synonymous with the realization of “the great Governor of the World’s” plan for the moral redemption of mankind.

American days of fasting and prayer were rooted in the political and religious culture of England. Puritans immigrating to North America in the early seventeenth century brought the practice of community-wide fasting and prayer with them. Seventeenth-century English theologians taught that fasting enhanced prayer’s efficacy. As proof, they pointed to numerous biblical examples of fasting generating spiritual power, including the account of Jesus fasting for “forty days and forty nights” in the wilderness before commencing his ministry.<sup>2</sup> They also offered physiological explanations of the benefits produced by fasting. Reverend William Perkins preached in 1608 that fasting “causeth watchfulness, & cuts off drowsiness, and so makes a man more lively and fresh in prayer...It makes us feele our wants and miseries, and so brings us to some conscience of our sinnes, whereupon the heart is more humbled and so stirred up more frequently to call for mercie.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in 1625 Reverend Henry Mason averred that “fulnes of bread, and the pampering of flesh...more immediately and directly breede matter for unchaste and fleshly lusts...On the contrary side, fasting, and the pinching of the body, and putting it to hardnesse, they are means to cool the bloud, and tame the

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:2 (Authorized Version).

<sup>3</sup> William Perkins, *A Godly and Learned Exposition of Christs Sermon in the Mount* (Cambridge: Thomas Brooke and Cantrelle Legge, 1608), 330, in Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Library, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rftid=xri:eebo:citation:99848892](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rftid=xri:eebo:citation:99848892).

spirits, and pull down the pride of the flesh.”<sup>4</sup> Such teachings were applied to both individual and community-wide fasting.

The community wide observance of fast days fit perfectly with the Puritans’ Calvinist faith. Calvinist doctrine maintained that God had established a “covenant” to redeem the elect from hell and the conditions of this covenant, or the terms and conditions of salvation, were the commandments as found in the Bible. The full ramifications of this covenant theology were succinctly explained by Puritan clergyman Thomas Shepard in a 1651 sermon. “As particular persons, when they break their Covenant, the Lord therefore breaks out against them,” Shepard stated, “so, when whole churches forsake their Covenant, the Lord therefore doth sorely visit them.”<sup>5</sup> Through this doctrinal reasoning, the Puritans were able to assign meaning to events experienced by an individual or community. Unfortunate events could be viewed as a sign that Providence was unhappy with that particular person or town, and fortunate events were often seen as confirming the opposite. For a people who saw themselves as “chosen,” and their efforts at establishing a perfect society central to God’s plan for the rest of the world, maintaining the favor of Providence was paramount. The Puritans viewed days of fasting, which always included calls for the community to collectively ask forgiveness for their collective sins, as ideal ways of regaining that providential favor when it was

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Mason, *Christian Humiliation, Or, A Treatise of Fasting* (London: George Purslowe for John Clarke, 1625), 24-26, in Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Library, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rftid=xri:eebo:citation:99856190](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rftid=xri:eebo:citation:99856190).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Shepard, “The Covenant of Grace” in Perry Miller, ed. *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956). Shepard’s sermon also makes frequent reference to the biblical verses upon which the covenant theology is based.

thought to have been lost, particularly at times of drought, famine or war. In this sense, days of fasting were ritualistic ways for a community to exhibit humility and submission to God.<sup>6</sup>

Fast days also fit with millennial elements of Puritan religious beliefs. The Puritans believed that the course of history was ordained by God to lead to a period of perfection on earth. Biblical prophecies held that this period of perfection would last for the space of one thousand years beginning at the second coming of Christ. Their immigration to America in order to establish a morally perfect society as an example for Europeans to follow, and in preparation for the Second Coming, contributed to the notion that America and its inhabitants would play a special role in the realization of these prophecies. In the eighteenth century, some ministers such as Jonathan Edwards even began to preach that the millennium would begin in America.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Puritans can be credited in large part for developing a distinct American millennialism.

Millennialism and covenant theology are key elements of the broader concept of providentialism. The Puritans' belief that America would play a crucial role in the ushering in of the millennium combined with their belief that they were God's "chosen" people and created this uniquely American form of providentialism. Whereas many in Europe similarly believed that the affairs of mankind were directed by God for his own purposes, through their own version of providentialism, the colonists projected the idea that they had been cast in the starring role for the final act in the history of mankind.

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<sup>6</sup> David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1989), 170-171.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 17.

Though the colonists were on the *periphery* of the British Empire, they saw themselves at the *center* of God's Kingdom.

American providentialism remained a viable worldview among colonists in New England even amidst the theological and cultural changes that occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its resilience is perhaps best exhibited by the continued observance of fast days in the time leading up to and during the American Revolution. In most New England colonies, fast days were observed each spring, though some communities made short-lived attempts at monthly, or even weekly fast days. Historians have commented on how the annual observances could become mundane rituals, performed without the zeal that initially accompanied the practice. But they also note how at times of crisis, be it waves of sickness or religious dissension, fast days were publicized amid a general sense of urgency and thus were less susceptible to being observed merely as formulaic rites.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there were several instances in which days of fasting were declared more spontaneously, particularly at times of crisis when it was believed that God was angry with them or when the clergy and political leadership perceived that the people were not keeping the covenant. Though fast days were by nature "affairs of the moment," it was the perceived momentousness of a particular instance that dictated the manner in which they were observed.<sup>9</sup>

Until the middle of the eighteenth century, fast days were primarily a practice of the New England colonies. While providential ideas existed in colonies outside New

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<sup>8</sup> Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, 60-61; and Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 170-171.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

England as early as the sixteenth century, it was not until the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century that providentialism experienced greater acceptance in the middle and southern colonies. Through the widespread revivals that characterized this movement, many of the providential ideas long held in New England were adapted to and embraced by other Protestant denominations, particularly the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists.<sup>10</sup> These revivals also fueled the belief that a “concert of prayer” would not only win the support of Providence, but could accelerate God’s plans to bring about the second coming of Christ and the Millennium. To this end, ministers such as Jonathan Edwards communicated with ministers in Scotland attempting to coordinate trans-Atlantic group prayers, believing that larger concerts of prayer would enhance the act’s potency.<sup>11</sup> Because a concert of prayer was inherent to fast day observance, these occasions remained significant aspects of American providential thought through periods of its ideological development and diffusion throughout the colonies.

Yet, the practice of fast days did not spread as quickly as the providential ideology supporting it. By the time of the Seven Years War, providential explanations were used throughout the colonies to assert the necessity and inevitability of a British victory over the French and Indians. Fast days dedicated to this purpose were held in several of the middle and southern colonies, but occurred most frequently in New England.<sup>12</sup> It was not until the imperial crisis that followed the war that fast days were

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<sup>10</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 13-15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America*, 32-35.

implemented in the middle and southern colonies as expressions of and action towards America's providential destiny.

For instance, Virginia's most notable fast day prior to the Revolution was declared in May 1774 by the House of Burgesses. It was proposed as a show of support for Virginia's "Sister Colony of Massachusetts Bay" after George III had declared its ports closed to trade as a consequence for the Boston Tea Party.<sup>13</sup> As Jefferson explained in his autobiography, "We were under conviction of the necessity of arousing our people from the lethargy into which they had fallen as to passing events; and thought that fasting and prayer would be most likely to call up and alarm their attention." The last time the House of Burgesses had declared a fast day was 1755, during the Seven Years War; but, as Jefferson explained further, since then "a new generation had grown up." Jefferson and his collaborators on the fast day proclamation were unsure of the protocol surrounding such an occasion, and therefore "rummaged over...the revolutionary precedents and forms of the Puritans of that day...[and] cooked up a resolution, somewhat modernizing their phrases..."<sup>14</sup> The motion was unanimously passed by the House of Burgesses, and on June 1, 1774 (the date the Boston Port Act took effect), "the people met generally, with anxiety and alarm in their countenances, and the effect of the day, through the whole

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<sup>13</sup> "Resolution of the House of Burgesses Designating a Day of Fasting and Prayer," in Julian P. Boyd, et. al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 35 vols. to date (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1:105-106.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1914), 11-13.

colony, was like a shock of electricity, arousing every man, and placing him erect and on his centre.”<sup>15</sup>

Jefferson’s description of Virginia’s 1774 day of fasting is significant to the history of fast days in America for several reasons. First, the twenty years separating the observances of fast days in Virginia shows the infrequency of the practice outside of New England. Second, the fact that the burgesses felt compelled to review the Puritans’ fast day proclamations and protocol reveals their awareness of the New England origins of this tradition and acceptance of the practice despite the different denominational tendencies of the two regions. Third, by stating that the fast day’s primary purpose was to rouse people from their “lethargy,” Jefferson displayed a belief that increased patriotism could be achieved through religious rhetoric connected to group fasting and prayer. Just as theologians believed that fasting sharpened the senses of the physical body to better discern spiritual matters, Jefferson apparently believed it would have the same effect on the body politic to better discern patriotic matters. With the outbreak of war between the colonies and Great Britain one year later, the Continental Congress exhibited this same belief, but on a much larger scale.

The resolution of the Continental Congress in June 1775 to appoint a day of fast throughout the colonies represented the first act of Congress that gave direction to all of its constituents. During the first months in which Congress had been in session, it had composed numerous letters and proclamations, but most of these had been addressed to

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

parties in England, Canada, the Caribbean, or individual colonies.<sup>16</sup> Thus, proclaiming a day of fast throughout the colonies was the first time this representative body had sought to govern those it represented and its first step at unifying its constituents.

It is impossible to know all the factors leading to the motion in Congress to declare a fast day, but some glimpses into the weeks preceding the decision are recoverable. To varying extents, the private correspondence of delegates reveals further influences on and reactions to the idea of a fast day. The day before the motion for a fast day was made in Congress, John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, that he had thoroughly enjoyed the sermons he had heard while in Philadelphia. Adams made particular mention of a sermon he had attended earlier that morning from “Mr. Duffil [George Duffield], a Preacher in this City whose Principles, Prayers and Sermons more nearly resemble, those of our New England Clergy than any that I have heard...[he] applied the whole Prophecy [of Isaiah chapter 35] to this Country, and gave us, as animating an entertainment, as I ever heard. He fill’d and swell’d the Bosom of every Hearer.”<sup>17</sup> Adams was not only impressed by the similarities between Duffield and the clergy in New England, but by the way he and other clergymen in Philadelphia applied biblical prophecy to assure the eventual restoration of American liberties. With this letter Adams enclosed a copy of a published sermon in order to demonstrate how “the Clergy,

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<sup>16</sup> All acts, writings, and declarations of the Continental Congresses are recorded in the *Journals of the Continental Congress*.

<sup>17</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 June 1775, *AFP*. In Isaiah 35, Isaiah prophesies that “the desert...shall blossom as the rose,” and the verses that follow indicate that this refers to the gathering and building up of “Zion” prior to the Millennial era. The text of Duffield’s sermon has not survived, but Adams’s remark that he applied the entire prophesy to America suggests that the sermon that inspired Adams to motion for a fast day pertained to American millennialism.

this Way, are but now beginning to engage in Politicks, and they engage with a fervour that will produce wonderfull Effects.”<sup>18</sup>

The political tenor of the Philadelphia clergy in the summer of 1775 appears to have been a primary influence on the timing of the first fast day. The fact that on June 11 Adams became so enthused about the effect politically charged sermons would have on American patriotism and that on June 12 Congress passed the motion to declare a fast day suggests that Adams was the delegate who made the motion. Adams apparently believed that a congressionally appointed fast day would give colonial clergymen both license and occasion to preach revolutionary politics from the pulpit.

It was also reasonable for Congress to believe that the day of fasting would unite the colonists as a people. Modern peoples have frequently used public festive rites to nurture a common identity, and the public observance of a fast day was no different. Though fast days were not particularly “festive,” they still served the purpose of a public holiday. By collectively taking a break from life’s ordinary events to focus for an entire day on the extraordinary, people in every colony would share the same experience: abstaining from food and drink, engaging in a concert of prayer, and listening to their respective ministers preach on the providential mission of America. Providentialism was a ready made idea upon which Congress could help build a collective American identity, as it had already permeated most denominational and regional barriers. This is not to say that Congress was envisioning an enduring American “nation” at this time, but that they

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

were keenly interested in the idea of a united people as it pertained to their resistance of Great Britain.<sup>19</sup>

The official Congressional record does not go into great detail about the debate surrounding the motion to declare a fast, but a letter from Benjamin Rush to John Adams over 30 years later helps fill the gap. Rush recalled to Adams that “Mr. Jefferson not only opposed [the fast day], but treated it with ridicule, and hinted some objections to the Christian religion. You arose and defended the motion, and in reply to Mr. Jefferson’s objections to Christianity you said...it was the only instance you had ever known of a man of sound sense and real genius that was an enemy to Christianity.”<sup>20</sup> According to Rush, Adams worried that he had offended Jefferson, but Jefferson “soon convinced [Adams] to the contrary by crossing the room and taking a seat in the chair next to [him].”<sup>21</sup>

Why did Jefferson oppose the fast day proposed by Congress in 1775 when just one year earlier he had been the main proponent of such an occasion in Virginia? The answer is not entirely clear. As no explanation by Jefferson has survived, if one was ever given, any attempt at reconciling his responses to these two fast days is speculative.

Jefferson’s opposition to fasting in general reflected his Deist beliefs. He viewed “nature’s God” as the Creator who ceased to be involved in human affairs. Thus, the idea

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 40-41. For more on the role of regions in the creation of national identities, see Edward L. Ayers, et al. *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1-10.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Rush to John Adams, 27 June 1812, L.H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 1144.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

of courting God's interposition by united fasting and prayer would have seemed ridiculous to him on a theological level. Jefferson's later writings also questioned the clergy's right to discuss public affairs from the pulpit, a sentiment no doubt conditioned by clerical opposition to his election in 1800.<sup>22</sup> It is likely he had similar opinions at this earlier date as well.

It could very well be that Jefferson was sensitive to the terms in which the respective fast days were proposed. Jefferson was very clear about the political strategy motivating his motion that a fast day be appointed by the House of Burgesses in 1774. That Adams and Jefferson debated the efficacy of fasting as a religious act suggests that the 1775 fast day was proposed in terms more religious than political. It is a reasonable speculation, then, that Jefferson objected to the 1775 fast day because of the context in which it was debated. It was not that he questioned its effectiveness as a political strategy, but more likely because in this instance he focused more on what he perceived as the spiritual futility of such religious exercises. Nevertheless, Congress passed the motion despite Jefferson's objections and it appointed a committee to compose a fast day proclamation to be published throughout the colonies.

The three-man committee Congress appointed to write the proclamation consisted of John Adams, William Hooper of North Carolina, and Robert Treat Paine of Massachusetts.<sup>23</sup> Hooper appears to have composed the earliest draft, a resolution

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of Jefferson's Deist views, as well as his opposition to discussing politics from the pulpit, see Andrew Burstein, *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 237-241.

<sup>23</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 1:81.

described recently as “much milder than the final resolve in substance and tone.”<sup>24</sup> It is precisely the differing tone and substance of Hooper’s draft from the final product approved by Congress that carries significant political implications.

Though he was sent to Congress as a delegate from North Carolina, Hooper had been born in Boston in 1742, the son of an Episcopalian minister. Upon graduating from Harvard in 1760, he chose a career in law rather than the ministry. Believing that Boston was overrun with lawyers, he moved to North Carolina and quickly established himself. Nevertheless, all three members of the committee were raised and educated in New England and were accordingly quite familiar with the traditional Puritan forms of proclaiming fast days.

Hooper’s draft set forth the essential information of the fast day, but possessed little by way of pomp or literary flourish. It opened as follows:

Resolved that it be and hereby it is recommended to the Inhabitants of the united Colonies in America of all Denominations That Thursday the 20th day of July next be set apart as a day of public humiliation fasting and prayer, that a total Abstinence from Servile labor and recreation be observed and all their religious Assemblies Solemnly Convened to humble themselves before God under the heavy Judgments felt and threatened to confess our manifold Sins, to implore the forgiveness of Heaven.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Paul H. Smith, et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:455-456. The quotation is the editor’s commentary on “William Hooper’s Draft Resolve.”

<sup>25</sup> William Hooper, “William Hooper’s Draft Resolve” in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:455-456.

The draft does not specifically mention George III and Parliament, but includes them in a broad plea that “Great Britain and its Rulers may have their eyes opened to discern the things that shall make for the peace and Happiness of the nation.” Hooper concludes by stating the ultimate aim of the fast was “that America may soon behold a Gracious interposition of Heaven for the redress of her many Grievances, the restoration of her invaded Liberties, [and] a reconciliation with the parent State upon terms Constitutional and Honourable to them both and the Security of them to the latest posterity.”<sup>26</sup>

What did Hooper mean by “Constitutional” and “Honourable” terms of reconciliation? In 1775, Congress was seeking a constitutional independence; not a complete separation from Great Britain, but an exemption from the control of Parliament.<sup>27</sup> The version of the fast day proclamation approved by Congress also expressed the desire for reconciliation with Great Britain, but changes Congress made to the language preceding the statement significantly transformed the implications of the phrase “terms constitutional and honourable to both.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, an examination of the additions and deletions Congress made to Hooper’s draft reveals more plainly the political message Congress was relaying to its constituents.

When Congress met as a committee of the whole to consider Hooper’s draft, it made substantial changes to the proclamation’s language. Though many elements of Hooper’s draft remained in the finished product, the final version approved by Congress

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1997), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Hooper, “William Hooper’s Draft Resolve,” in *Letters of the Delegates to Congress*, 1:455-456.

employed a more eloquent prose style, made bolder declarations and contained more dangerous implications. The approved proclamation was also twice the length of Hooper's draft and the opening paragraph expressly addressed the general nature of God and his involvement in the events of mankind.

Whereas Hooper's draft began by simply stating the essential information of the appointed fast day, Congress added a preface charged with providential language. The added preface stated,

As the great Governor of the world, by His supreme and universal providence, not only conducts the course of nature with unerring wisdom and rectitude, but frequently influences the minds of men to serve the wise and gracious purposes of His providential government; and it being at all times our indispensable duty devoutly to acknowledge His superintending providence, especially in times of impending danger and public calamity, to reverence and adore his immutable justice as well as to implore His merciful interposition for our deliverance.<sup>29</sup>

The importance of this added preface cannot be overstated. It became the premise upon which the rest of the proclamation was based. By using the intervening nature of God as the reason for proclaiming a day of fasting and humiliation, Congress explicitly and effectively couched the actual declaration of a continental fast day that followed this

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<sup>29</sup> "Resolution for a Fast," June 12, 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2: 87.

paragraph in providential thought. Whereas Hooper's draft never used the term "providence," the approved proclamation used it four times. The invocation of Providence in the fast day proclamation was intended to equate resistance to Great Britain's imperial policies with the colonies' compliance to God's will, and to present the entire conflict as more than just a battle between two conflicting views of taxation and representation, but as a fight between good and evil. It was, in effect, God's will that their "many grievances" and "invaded rights" should be redressed. Reconciliation "on terms constitutional and honorable to both" still referred to the colonists' terms, but now their terms and conditions were portrayed as synonymous with those of God.<sup>30</sup> By asking the colonists to pray that George III may be "inspired with wisdom to discern and pursue the true interest of his subjects," Congress implied that his actions had hitherto been in opposition to God's grand plan, not just for America, but for the entire world.

More subtle providential phrases were added to the proclamation, including references to God as a political figure. By referring to God as "the great Governor of the World," Congress reasserted the belief that God governed all human events. More particularly, by assigning political titles to God, Congress presented the image of America's political affairs being directed by an omniscient and omnipotent "Ruler" who was operating through Congress and the assemblies of the individual colonies. Congress used such phrases to help legitimize itself as a political body authorized by God to advance America's providential destiny. So when Congress referred to God as "the great

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<sup>30</sup> "Resolution for a Fast," June 12, 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2: 87.

Governor,” “the Ruler of the Universe,” or even “his Most Christian Majesty,” it was an overt politicization of Providence.<sup>31</sup>

This examination of the revisions Congress made to Hooper’s draft reveals that the addition of providential language was intentional; that in this instance, the invocation of providence was not a mere platitude like “so help me God” has become to present-day political figures. Clearly, relating the essential information of the fast day was not the only purpose of the proclamation. If it was, then Hooper’s draft would have more than adequately served this purpose. The addition of providential rhetoric allowed the fast day proclamation to serve as a piece of political propaganda. This is not surprising as the Revolutionary leadership have long stood out as an especially gifted group when it came to eloquently making their case in published writings.<sup>32</sup> In June 1775, Congress sent the first draft of the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms back to a committee to be reworked because Congress did not feel it used language that adequately explained their purpose for engaging the British Army in combat.<sup>33</sup>

The drafting of the Declaration of Independence nearly a year after the first fast day was proclaimed further points to the delegates’ readiness to seize opportunities to gain public support by using purposeful language in justifying their actions. Their revision of the Declaration shows that the delegates were very particular about the language used in documents expressing their purposes, motivations, and ideology and

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<sup>31</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2:87, 22:138, 16:252.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Pauline Maier, *American Scripture*, 144.

were well aware of its implied meanings. For instance, language in Jefferson's draft of the Declaration blaming George III for perpetuating the slave trade in America was removed because its ideological implications threatened the unity of Congress and the colonies. Another example is the inclusion of two additional references to God by Congress. Though Jefferson referred to God in his draft as "nature's god" and man's "Creator," titles congruent with Jefferson's Deist beliefs, Congress inserted references to "the supreme judge of the world" and an appeal to "the protection of divine providence" in order to appeal to a broader religious constituency.<sup>34</sup> Just as a comparison of Jefferson's initial draft of the Declaration with the final version provides insight into the motives and ideology of Congress, so too does a comparison of Hooper's draft of the fast day proclamation with the final version of that document. Like the Declaration of Causes and Necessities and the Declaration of Independence, the first Revolutionary fast day proclamation was a pragmatic document turned carefully by Congress into an expression of justifying ideology.

Congress subsequently proclaimed days of fasting every spring and usually a corresponding day of thanksgiving in the fall through the end of the war.<sup>35</sup> On each occasion, a new committee was appointed to write the proclamation. As the events of the war and the morale of the colonists changed, so did the specific application of providential language. For instance, in the spring of 1779, there was no end to the war in

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<sup>34</sup> A comparison of Jefferson's draft with the final version of the Declaration comprises "Appendix C" in Maier, *American Scripture*, 236-241.

<sup>35</sup> There is no explanation in the congressional record why Congress did not appoint a fast day in 1777. Entries in *The Journals of the Continental Congress* for that year makes no mention of any motions to this end. But the first day of Thanksgiving appointed by Congress was in the fall of 1777.

sight. In the fast day proclamation of that year, Congress explained to the colonists why the American victory assured them by Providence had not yet occurred when it stated, “His divine Providence hath, hitherto, in a wonderful manner, conducted us, so that we might acknowledge that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.”<sup>36</sup> The expression “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong” was a well-known excerpt from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The overarching theme of the eleventh chapter from which the verse is taken is Providence’s direction of all human events, or “all things under the sun.”<sup>37</sup> Congress included it to encourage enduring patriotism over the course of a prolonged war by convincing the colonists that doing so was essential to their development into the tried and tested people God’s purposes required. To be an ardent and enduring patriot was to be a good Christian.

The 1779 proclamation also offered a providential perspective on the newly negotiated alliance with France. The proclamation appealed to the people to pray that Providence would “give to both Parties of this Alliance, Grace to perform with Honor and Fidelity their National Engagements.”<sup>38</sup> This is a significant development because just twenty years earlier, Americans were using providentialism to portray France and their Catholic beliefs as anti-Christ, working to impede the fulfillment of God’s foreordained plan for the world. But once France was aligned politically with the Americans, Congress was willing to overlook France’s religious disposition that just

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<sup>36</sup> “Resolution for a Fast,” March 20, 1779, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 13:342-344.

<sup>37</sup> Ecclesiastes 11:9.

<sup>38</sup> “Resolution for a Fast,” March 20, 1779, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 13:342-344.

twenty years earlier had posed such a dire threat to God's work on the earth. The extension of providential favor to France by Congress was inconsistent with fundamental tenets of Protestantism (which typically deemed the Pope and Catholics in general as anti-Christ) and was purely a political gesture. In this case, Congress assumed the prerogative of determining which countries were worthy of having Americans pray for the favor of Providence to be extended to them.

The nuanced language in the Revolutionary fast day proclamations also exhibits ideological developments in the idea of American providentialism itself. In 1775, the ultimate aim of Congress was not yet independence, but reconciliation with Great Britain. Thus, the idea that God's special plan for America could be fulfilled as a part of the British Empire was reflected in the proclamations of 1775 and 1776. The first called for the intervention of God so that "the British nation [would] be influenced to regard the things that belong to her peace, before they are hid from her eyes."<sup>39</sup> The next year's proclamation warns that if Great Britain continued to deny reconciliation on the colonists' terms, remaining "deaf to the voice of reason and humanity, and inflexibly bent, on desolation and war," they would then "constrain [the colonies] to repel their hostile invasions by open resistance, that it may please the Lord of Hosts, the God of Armies...."<sup>40</sup> This language provides insights into the global perspective of American providentialism: God had a special purpose for America, and whether it would be fulfilled from within or from without the British Empire was entirely up to the King and

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<sup>39</sup> "Resolution for a Fast," June 12, 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2:87.

<sup>40</sup> "Resolution for a Fast," March 16, 1776, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 4:209.

Parliament. And should Great Britain continue to ignore America's providential role, it risked the fate of a nation acting in opposition to God.

In fact, proclamations issued after independence was declared no longer portrayed Great Britain merely as a parent state guilty of mistreating its colonies. Rather, British tyranny was portrayed as anti-providence, deliberately seeking to destroy Americans' freedom and thus prevent the realization of God's master plan.<sup>41</sup> In one such proclamation, Congress explained why Providence required innocent blood to be spilt for America to be delivered from British oppression. George III was compared to Pharaoh, whose incredulity in refusing to free the Israelites from bondage was used by Providence "as a scourge of the Omnipotent to vindicate his slighted Majesty."<sup>42</sup> This biblical allusion not only cast the British government as an institution seeking to thwart God's plan for his chosen people, but depicted the colonists as God's Covenant People.

Fast day proclamations were not alone in depicting the British government as anti-providence. This imagery was used in numerous political cartoons, published sermons, and political speeches dating back to the Stamp Act crisis in 1763. Many Americans were taught by their ministers that the images of dragons and beasts in the Book of Revelation referred "to 'all the tyrants of the earth' and 'to every species of tyranny.'"<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, by publicly contrasting itself with the anti-Christian British

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<sup>41</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 54-56.

<sup>42</sup> "Resolution for a Fast," March 20, 1779, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 13:343.

<sup>43</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 60. Bloch quotes from Gad Hitchcock, *A Sermon Preached at Plymouth December 22d, 1774* (Boston, 1775) and Samuel West, *A Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Council...May 26, 1776* in John Wingate Thornton, ed., *The Pulpit of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1860), 319.

government, Congress presented itself as a God ordained political body, or at least one that had God's interests in mind and deserved the allegiance of Christian colonists.

The British government naturally saw the war differently, and likewise utilized providential language in their appointed fast days. But the distinctions between the proclamations of the two governments are significant. Whereas the American fast day proclamations were drafted for each occasion, the British government seemingly used a template, with the primary difference of each being the date of the appointed fast. Like the American proclamations, the British versions included pleas for the pardon of sins. The rest of the royal proclamation mainly consisted of requests that all subjects fast and pray for God to open the eyes of the treasonous and rebellious Americans to the errors of their ways while delivering "loyal subjects...from the Violence, Injustice, and Tyranny of the daring Rebels who have assumed to themselves the Exercises of Arbitrary Power." And as the American proclamations always indicated that the fast day was recommended, the British fast days were appointed by "strict order and command."<sup>44</sup>

Despite the differences in their general approaches and specific language, the British and American Revolutionary fast day proclamations contain some common elements. Both sides were courting a providential favor they claimed already existed. Since the conflict's beginning, both governments saw their respective positions as favored by God and therefore destined for victory, it is therefore illogical to view either country's fast day proclamations simply as religious expressions. Both countries used

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<sup>44</sup> *British Royal Proclamations Relating to America, 1603-1783*, (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1911). The particular proclamations cited here were issued on the following dates: 23 January 1778, 1 January 1779, 13 December 1779, 12 January 1781, and 9 January 1782).

them as political tools as well, aimed at justifying their respective positions in the conflict and prompting those they governed to action. At the war's conclusion, however, it was Congress that appointed a day of Thanksgiving to assure their constituents that their victory was indeed a sign of providential favor.<sup>45</sup>

The tradition of appointing days of fasting and prayer continued even after American independence was achieved. The Continental Congress appointed a fast day each spring up until the adoption of the new federal government in 1789. Some states declared days of fasting and prayer in association with the ratification process of the Constitution, but these were few in number and observed only in the state declaring them. National observance of fast days returned in the 1790s amid the partisan battles between the Federalists and the Republicans. But because of the hostility between the parties, they had a more divisive effect than the Revolutionary fast days. Rather than unifying citizens of the new country, these proclamations served to declare the political agenda of the party issuing the proclamation as in-line with Providence and to cast the views of the opposing party as contrary to God's ordained plan.<sup>46</sup> James Madison appointed days of fasting and prayer to unite the country and drum up support for the war effort from 1812 to 1815, and the practice continued periodically all the way up to Lincoln's fast day proclamation during the Civil War.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Thanksgiving Proclamation," October 18, 1783, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 25:699-701.

<sup>46</sup> David Waldstriecker, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 146-148.

<sup>47</sup> James Madison, "Recommending a Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer," 16 November 1814, in John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, eds., *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65981>; Abraham Lincoln, "Proclaiming a Day of National Humiliation, Prayer and

Providential language remained a fundamental aspect of these post-Revolutionary fast days, but as the idea of American providentialism developed, and America's political culture changed, so did the implications of such rhetoric. But the providential tone of America's Revolutionary fast days makes the message Congress was sending its constituents very clear: for Americans to realize their divinely ordained destiny, throwing off British tyranny was essential and not doing so would have ramifications felt globally for generations to come. As Congress portrayed it in these fast day proclamations, the American Revolution was not only a watershed moment in both the political history of mankind, but in its religious history as well.

## Chapter 4: Chaplains and the Continental Army

In 1777, General Nathanael Greene and John Adams discussed ways of inspiring greater bravery and discipline among American soldiers. Greene suggested that Congress begin issuing medals to be awarded to soldiers for bravery in battle. “Patriotism is a glorious Principle,” he wrote to Adams, “but never deny her the necessary aids.”<sup>1</sup> Adams responded that though vanity was indeed an “operative Motive to great Action...Religion is the greatest Incentive, and wherever it has prevailed, [it] has never failed to produce Heroism.”<sup>2</sup> Just as Jefferson overtly described the effect fast days could have in rousing a lethargic population to political action, Adams and Greene were candid about religion’s potential for transforming the “rabble in arms” that comprised the Continental Army into a respectable military force.

From the Continental Army’s inception in May, 1775, Congress and the army’s generals were concerned about both the martial and moral discipline of the troops. American soldiers’ lack of martial discipline was manifest in such activities as wasting ammunition to cure boredom, an inability to satisfactorily complete even the most basic drills common in European armies, and the filthy state in which they maintained themselves and their camps. In order to instill in the troops the martial discipline expected of a professional army, America’s Revolutionary leadership relied on European experts in military strategy and discipline; it enacted numerous forms of corporal and capital punishment. Soldiers’ lack of moral discipline was marked by widespread

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<sup>1</sup> Nathanael Greene to John Adams, May 2, 1777, Richard K Showman, et al., ed., *The Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 13 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 2:64. (Henceforth, *PNG*).

<sup>2</sup> John Adams to Nathanael Greene, May 9, 1777, *PNG*, 2:74.

profanity, drunkenness, and gambling. As a remedy to the army's immorality, Congress employed chaplains as agents of moral reform.

Why, exactly, was America's Revolutionary leadership so concerned about moral behavior and why did it place so much trust in the effectiveness of chaplains? The answer goes beyond a mere desire to match the professionalism of the British army. It involves a symbolic identification with religious values: American troops were meant to be seen as "Christian soldiers," part of a carefully constructed modern "Army of Israel" dispatched to protect America's providential destiny. Additionally, Congress relied heavily on the religious rhetoric of chaplains to encourage re-enlistment and discourage desertion. Ultimately, the most important role America's Revolutionary leadership assigned to chaplains during the Revolution was to keep Americans in the war.

Of all the vices present in the Continental Army, General George Washington most often addressed profanity and gambling. Both in his letters to Congress and his communications within the army, Washington repeatedly expressed his displeasure with soldiers' use of impious language. He succinctly explained his aversion to profanity in his general orders to the army on 3 August 1776, in which he lamented that "the foolish, and wicked practice, of profane cursing and swearing (a Vice heretofore little known in an American Army) is growing into fashion," adding that "we can have little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our Arms, if we insult it by our impiety, and folly." Profanity, Washington concluded, was a "vice so mean and low...that every man of sense, and

character detests and despises it.”<sup>3</sup> On the matter of gambling, he ordered that “Gaming of every kind is expressly forbid as the foundation of evil & the cause of many Gallant & Brave Officers Ruin,” though “Games of exercise for amusement may not only be permitted but encouraged.”<sup>4</sup> Washington’s prescribed cure for these vices was regular attendance at religious services; he petitioned Congress for the appointment of more chaplains to minister to the army.<sup>5</sup>

Washington’s petition inspired Congress to appoint one chaplain to every two regiments.<sup>6</sup> In July 1776, he ordered the commanding officers of each regiment to recommend as chaplains “persons of good character and exemplary lives.” Washington reiterated to the army the necessity of moral discipline, stating that “The blessing and protection of Heaven on our Arms are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger.” Thus, he continued, “every officer, and man” was to “endeavor so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country.”<sup>7</sup> At face value, it appears that the Revolutionary leadership’s insistence on appointing chaplains to minister to the troops and reform immoral behavior was merely an attempt to establish discipline and order in an army where rowdiness and disorder dominated. But upon closer examination, the personal

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<sup>3</sup> Washington, “General Orders,” August 3, 1776, *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary Series* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985-2008), 18 Vols., 5:551. (Henceforth, *PGW-RWS*).

<sup>4</sup> Washington, “Circular Instructions to the Brigade Commanders” May 26, 1777, *PGW-RWS*, 9:533.

<sup>5</sup> Royster, *An American People at War*, 76-77, 162; Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> George Washington to John Hancock, June 28, 1776, in *PGW-RWS*, 5:134; The resulting resolution by Congress is in *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 4:61.

<sup>7</sup> Washington, “General Orders,” July 9, 1776, *PGW-RWS*, 5:246.

correspondence of several of the leaders as well as resolutions passed in Congress, reveal that top officials of the government expected much more of the army's chaplains than merely reforming soldiers' decorum.

By accompanying the army, chaplains reinforced the imagery of the Continental Army as a military force with a religious purpose. Washington and Congress used the image of American troops comprising a modern Army of Israel as a symbol aimed at encouraging Americans to take up the fight. In the Old Testament, the Children of Israel were delivered from slavery in Egypt and, following the successful military campaigns of their army, inherited their "Promised Land." In the common application of this story to the Revolution, the Continental Army acted as the Army of Israel, delivering Americans from the "slavery" of British tyranny to bring about America's "Promised Land," or the realization of America's future place as the bastion of political freedom and civil harmony. Once this promised state was realized, Americans anticipated that their country would enjoy economic prosperity as well as greatness in the arts and sciences.<sup>8</sup> Such imagery strengthened the belief among Americans that their victory would be celebrated by their posterity for generations to come.

It became common in America during the 1760s and 1770s to relate the conflict with Great Britain to biblical events and stories. Many clergymen began to read the Bible through a lens of republican ideology. They depicted Israel as a republic and prophesied a millennial kingdom of both civil and religious liberty. This republican reading of the Bible went beyond the mere application of scriptural lessons of morality to the present; it

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 153.

portrayed republicanism as the principle of governance endorsed by God from the beginning. As one historian has described it, “the clergy appropriated the means of traditional religion to accomplish the ends of civic humanism.”<sup>9</sup> Civic activity to resist tyranny and preserve republican freedom was thus equated with Christian activity. To be a good citizen was to be a good Christian, and vice versa.

America’s political and military leadership embraced this republican interpretation of the bible as well, particularly as it pertained to the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. In the Continental Congress in 1776, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson’s proposal for the official seal of the United States featured the armies of Pharaoh being swallowed by the Red Sea while Moses and the Israelites watched from the shore under the protection of a pillar of fire. The legend surrounding the seal read “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, when Patrick Henry insisted in 1778 that America’s separation from Great Britain must be complete and permanent, he referenced the Israelites who wanted to return to Egypt shortly after their departure into the wilderness. “The old leaven still works,” Henry wrote to Richard Henry Lee, “the flesh pots of Egypt are still savoury to degenerate palates.”<sup>11</sup>

The Articles of War drafted by Congress to dictate the policies and procedures of the Continental Army included provisions directly related to the Army of Israel. During

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<sup>9</sup> Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> For Franklin and Jefferson’s description of the seal, see *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:494-497. An artist’s rendering of the Franklin-Jefferson proposal for the Great Seal of the United States was published in Benson J. Lossing, “Great Seal of the United States,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, July 1856, 178-86, image at 180.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Henry to Richard Henry Lee, June 18, 1778, H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Official Letters of the Governors of the State of Virginia*, 3 vols. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1926-1929), 1:292.

the first years of the war, the maximum number of lashes a soldier could receive as punishment for misconduct was thirty-nine— an allusion to the Mosaic Law of “forty stripes, save one.”<sup>12</sup> This was far fewer than the thousand lashes permitted in the British army. Thus, like the providential purposes of the war preached to the soldiers at mandatory Sunday services, the symbolism in the army’s method of administering corporal punishment (at least initially) was intended to inspire the troops Washington commanded to behave as those once commanded by Moses and Joshua.

When the conduct of American troops fell short of such a lofty ideal of discipline (and it consistently did), and when their campaigns lacked the success of their Old Testament counterpart, officers expected chaplains to act as spokesmen for this ideal.<sup>13</sup> Their task became keeping alive the notion of America’s providential mission. Interestingly, when the army won a battle, it was readily acknowledged as the fulfillment of America’s providential destiny and the result of the army’s virtue. But when it lost, the outcome was explained in different terms. Losses did not cast doubt on the perception that Providence had assured an American victory, nor were they seen as evidence that the army was unworthy of victory. Rather, it brought into question the actions and strategies of the generals in command. For example, when the army lost the Battle of Brandywine and the Battle of Germantown, campaigns many in Congress thought should have been sure victories for the army, Washington, and not the army’s

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<sup>12</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2:119; Deuteronomy 25:1-3, and 2 Corinthians 11:24. The total number of lashes permitted was changed to 100 when the Articles of War were revised in 1776.

<sup>13</sup> On the consistent lack of discipline in the Continental Army and the slim prospects of it ever being obtained, see Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 164-165, 168-169.

immorality, took the brunt of the blame. The army as a whole was praised for their successes, but only its leaders were criticized for its failures.<sup>14</sup>

Sermons were often preached to regiments prior to deployment and, once in the field, prior to engagements with the enemy in order to rouse a heightened religious enthusiasm in the troops. The experience of Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr prior to their ill-fated invasion of Canada exemplifies the effect such sermons could have on the way American soldiers viewed the war. Before embarking on their campaign, they attended religious services conducted by Reverend Samuel Springs in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Springs preached a moving sermon, after which the men paraded into the vestibule, displaying their colors and arms as the reverend passed through the company. Several officers then asked to visit the tomb of George Whitfield, the British evangelist who had been a prominent figure in the Great Awakening. The sexton removed the coffin's lid and the officers cut the remnants of Whitfield's clothing into pieces, dividing them among themselves. By carrying relics from an American religious icon into battle, these officers "turned the expedition into a quasi-religious crusade."<sup>15</sup>

Congressional delegates and army officers alike viewed the religious instruction provided by chaplains as essential encouragement amid the always trying process of enlisting and retaining soldiers. In 1777, General Nathanael Greene reported to John Adams that there was a "great inattention and indifference that appears among the People

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 176-177, 188-189.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* (New York: Viking Press, 2007), 22-23.

in general about the recruiting the Army.”<sup>16</sup> In his reply, Adams listed several possible causes for this “unfavourable Temper in the People,” not the least of which was “The Prevalence of Dissipation, Debauchery, Gaming, Prophaneness, and Blasphemy, [which] terrifies the best people upon the Continent from trusting their Sons and other Relations among so many dangerous snares and Temptations.” Adams further explained that “Multitudes of People who would with chearfull Resignation Submit their Families to the Dangers of the sword shudder at the destructive Effects of Vice and Impiety.” Adams was adamant that “Discipline alone...can stem the Torrent,” and that to this end, “Chaplains are of great use.”<sup>17</sup> In his reply, Greene indicated his complete agreement with Adams on these matters.<sup>18</sup>

To Greene and Adams, chaplains were essential to their efforts in enlisting new men and to the army’s overall success. Their concern for the army’s moral condition was not merely religious, but primarily pragmatic. Nowhere in this particular lamentation of the immoral state of the continental soldiers did they reference God or the blessings of heaven. In this instance, the necessity of chaplains generating moral reform throughout the army was explained strictly in terms of increased enlistments.

The Revolutionary leadership similarly relied upon chaplains to help retain the services of those already in the army. This included the reenlistment of soldiers at the end of their terms of service, but more importantly, discouraging desertions. The

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<sup>16</sup> Nathanael Greene to John Adams, May 2, 1777, *PNG*, 2:64-65.

<sup>17</sup> John Adams to Nathanael Greene, May 9, 1777, *PNG*, 2:74

<sup>18</sup> Nathanael Greene to John Adams, May 28, 1777, *PNG*, 2:98.

Revolutionary leadership frequently expressed to each other their confidence that dutiful chaplains could stem the tide of Americans leaving the war early.

Desertion plagued the Continental Army throughout the war, and it had many causes. The problem chiefly lay in the fact that the army initially relied upon voluntarism. Payment for military service during the Revolution was irregular at best, and caused many to pack up and go home. Others deserted due to the effects of inadequate provisions such as food and clothing. Others left out of boredom during long periods of idleness. Still, others left dispirited from defeat on the battlefield and even more when the anticipated quick victory over the British never materialized. But the greatest cause of desertion was homesickness. Many young men who enlisted in the army were traveling far from home for the first time. Additionally, many had enlisted with the expectation of being posted locally. For example, the excuse eighteen deserters from a New Hampshire company gave in 1775 was “that they didn’t intend when they enlisted to join the Army, but to be station’d at Hampton [N.H.]”<sup>19</sup> While some Americans deserted to the British for money, the majority of deserters simply went home.<sup>20</sup> When the army was encamped each winter, an estimated eight to ten men

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<sup>19</sup> Nathaniel Folsom to New Hampshire Committee of Safety, July 1, 1775, Nathaniel Bouton, ed., *New Hampshire Provincial Papers: Documents and Records Relating to the Province of New Hampshire, from 1774 to 1776*, 7 vols. (Nashua, N.H.: 1873), 7:557.

<sup>20</sup> The different causes of desertion are discussed in James H. Edmonson, “Desertion in the American Army during the Revolutionary War,” (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1971), ix-x, and in Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 60-61, 66, 71-72.

deserted every day. In the end, the average desertion rate in the Continental Army for the entire war was between twenty and twenty-five percent.<sup>21</sup>

Desertion represented such a serious obstacle to American victory because it could begin in small numbers, with one or two men deserting a unit, and quickly grow to epidemic proportions, threatening to diminish entire regiments. During the winter of 1777, Washington wrote to Congress that if they were unable to slow the rate of desertion in the army, he would “be obliged to detach one half of the Army to bring back the other.”<sup>22</sup> Other high-ranking officers frequently expressed their anxiety over desertion in their communications with Washington. Brigadier General William Irvine wrote to Washington in 1780, concerned “that the Spirit of desertion still prevails.”<sup>23</sup> Even in the final years of the war desertion remained a concern of officers such as Major General William Heath. “Desertions are too frequent in our army,” Heath complained to Washington, “I assure you it is become a serious affair. They are everyday increasing.”<sup>24</sup> In hindsight, desertion does not appear to have significantly altered the outcome of any particular engagement. But the fact remains that at the time, it was a source of real

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<sup>21</sup> Edmonson, “Desertion in the American Army during the Revolutionary War,” 217-261.

<sup>22</sup> Washington to John Hancock, January 31, 1777, *PGW-RWS*, 8:201-202.

<sup>23</sup> William Irvine to Washington, January 4, 1780, *Pennsylvania Archives: Selected and Arranged from Original Documents in the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth*, 135 vols., (Philadelphia: Joseph Severns and Co., 1853-1935), 8:74.

<sup>24</sup> William Heath to Washington, July 23, 1782, *William Heath Papers*, 26 vols., Massachusetts Historical Society, 25:379-380.

anxiety for American generals who feared that it would harm morale and discourage recruiting in the future.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, the Revolutionary leadership was hard-pressed to stop desertions. Commanding officers offered bounties for the return of deserting soldiers. But as most returned to their homes, members of their hometown were reluctant to turn in their neighbors. In November 1775, Congress amended the Articles of War to increase the punishment for desertion to death in hopes of scaring soldiers into staying for the entire term of their enlistments. Some were executed to send a message to other soldiers that they needed to honor the oath taken at the time of enlistment. However, the intended effect of this more severe punishment was never realized, as most captured deserters sentenced to execution were pardoned at the last minute.<sup>26</sup>

Of the various measures used by the Revolutionary leadership to stop desertion, chaplains became one of their primary resources. In 1777, when the rate of desertion was rising, Adams and Greene discussed the problem at length in a series of letters. One letter is particularly telling of what the two influential men believed was the best solution to the problem. In June 1777, Adams wrote:

There is one Principle of Religion which has contributed vastly to the  
Excellence of Armies, who had very little else of Religion or Morality, the  
Principle I mean is the Sacred obligation of oaths, which among both

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<sup>25</sup> Edmonson, "Desertion in the American Army during the Revolutionary War," x-xi.

<sup>26</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 3:330-334; For a thorough accounting of the various punishments Congress affixed to desertion throughout the war, see Edmonson, "Desertion in the American Army during the Revolutionary War," esp. chapter 4.

Romans and Britons who seem to have placed the whole of Religion and Morality in the punctual observance of them, have done Wonders. It is this alone which prevents Desertions from your Enemies. I think our Chaplains ought to make the Solemn Nature and the sacred obligation of oaths the favourite Subject of their Sermons to the Soldiery. Odd as it may seem, I cannot help considering a Serious Sense of the solemnity of an oath as the Corner Stone of Discipline, and that it might be made to contribute more, to the order of the Army, than any or all of the Instruments of Punishment.<sup>27</sup>

According to Adams, the honor of making and keeping oaths was essential to the successes of both the ancient Roman and modern British armies. Conversely, the levity with which many Americans considered their oaths when enlisting was the chief cause of the Continental Army's instability. If this one principle could bring success to armies that, in Adams's opinion, had "little else of religion and morality," than it would work wonders for America's army. If in their sermons the army's chaplains would depict the keeping of oaths as a sign of manliness and true Christianity, then Adams and Greene believed that desertion would subsequently be equated with cowardice and sin. American soldiers would be motivated to stay in the army not just for the sake of their country, but for the sake of their own souls.

Officers not only utilized chaplains to prevent desertions in the first place, but to limit the number who followed suit immediately after a desertion had occurred. For

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<sup>27</sup> Adams to Greene, June 2, 1777, *PNG*, 2:102-103.

instance, in December, 1775, Washington wrote to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr. lamenting that a Reverend Leonard of Connecticut was no longer able to continue serving as a chaplain. He praised Leonard's conduct and ability "to animate the Soldiery and impress them with a knowledge of the important Rights we are contending for." Washington further noted that after several troops had deserted earlier that year, Leonard "delivered a sensible and judicious discourse, holding forth the necessity of courage and bravery, and at the same time of perfect obedience and subordination to those in Command."<sup>28</sup> In this instance, Washington credited Leonard entirely for preventing further desertions. Clearly, his dismay in losing such an able chaplain can be attributed to Leonard's ability to inspire soldiers and keep them in the war.

Another event indicative of the army's reliance on chaplains to maintain soldiers' enthusiasm for the war occurred in 1778. A group of officers petitioned Congress to appoint a chaplain fluent in German to minister to the many German-American soldiers in the army's ranks. In their petition, the officers acknowledged both the martial and moral benefits chaplains brought to the army, but were concerned that the language barrier denied many of the German speaking soldiers these benefits when they attended mandatory Sunday services. But if the men could regularly hear a chaplain preach in their primary language, the officers argued, it would "not fail...to become the Soul of military Vigour in many of them."<sup>29</sup> Clearly, chaplains were considered a vital source of this "military vigour," and these officers thought it was too great a risk to deny them this

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<sup>28</sup> Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., December 15, 1775, *PGW-RWS*, 2:555-556.

<sup>29</sup> "Petition from Sundry German Officers," May 6, 1778, *Papers of the Continental Congress*, No. 42, V, folio 69.

enthusiasm for the Revolutionary cause. Congress agreed and appointed Reverend Henry Miller to the post.<sup>30</sup>

But even the most persuasive chaplains were at times unable to prevent mass desertion. Brigadier General Alexander McDougall recalled such an occasion in a letter to Washington in 1776. McDougall's men threatened to desert when their pay was late, but McDougall pleaded with them to remain a while longer so that he could arrange for prompt payment from headquarters. "Encouraged by these hopes," McDougall wrote to Washington while his men deliberated, "the Troops were collected in the church, the proposal opened up to them, and warmly recommended to them by their chaplain... There was reason at first to expect the Consent of the whole to Stay; but as they have delayed an answer So long, I fear not above two Thirds of them will Stay, owing to the Machinations of Some of the officers, who are bent on goeing."<sup>31</sup> McDougall's experience exemplifies how chaplains were relied upon by commanding officers to inspire soldiers to persevere among challenging circumstances. As McDougall saw it, if the chaplain's speech failed to inspire his men, the majority of his brigade would return home. He had placed nearly all of his hopes for stopping the mass desertion in the persuasive powers of religion and a chaplain.

The Revolutionary leadership's reliance upon religious rhetoric to reform and inspire American soldiers is further reflected in their anxiety over procuring a sufficient

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<sup>30</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 11:507-508. At the time of Miller's appointment, Congress was assigning one chaplain per brigade. However, Miller's case was special as he was not attached to a specific brigade but was to minister to all German-speaking soldiers.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander McDougall to Washington, December 30, 1776, *PGW-RWS*, 7:485-486.

number of competent chaplains. For this reason, Congress frequently revisited the policies and procedures regulating chaplain service. Initially, one chaplain was assigned to each brigade. This worked until the army was spread out following the campaigns of 1775 and Congress authorized the switch to regimental chaplains at Washington's behest.<sup>32</sup>

Washington was not only concerned with the number of chaplains in the army, but the quality as well. Early in the war, Washington blamed the shortage of competent chaplains on the position's low rate of pay. He complained to John Hancock that a chaplain's pay was "too small to encourage men of Abilities- some of them who have Left their flocks, are obliged to pay the parson acting for them, more than they receive- I need not point out the great utility of Gentlemen whose Lives & Conversation are unexceptionable, being employed for that service, in this Army."<sup>33</sup> Washington was not exaggerating when he stated that the army lacked competent chaplains. Congress was frequently petitioned by clergymen purporting to be owed payment for their services. Each petition required an investigation in which it was often discovered that the clergyman in question had either been absent the entire time or had largely neglected his duties.<sup>34</sup> According to Washington's appeal, Congress raised a chaplain's monthly pay to a level greater than that of a lieutenant.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Washington to John Hancock, December 31, 1775, *PGW-RWS*, 2:624; *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 4:61.

<sup>33</sup> Washington to John Hancock, December 31, 1775, *PGW-RWS*, 2:624.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 14:659.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:383-384.

The distribution of one chaplain per two regiments worked for nearly two years, but a shortage of funds in 1777 necessitated a change. Congress reverted to the policy of appointing one chaplain per brigade, but increased chaplain pay to the level of a colonel.<sup>36</sup> Washington was not amenable to this change, as he believed it would limit chaplains' ability to minister to the soldiers at a more personal level.<sup>37</sup> When Hancock explained to Washington the reasoning behind these changes, he echoed the general's earlier remarks. Hancock wrote that "The Regulations respecting Chaplains in the Army are highly necessary. By increasing their Pay, and enlarging the Bounds of their Duty, the Congress are in Hopes of engaging Gentlemen of superior Learning & Virtue to fill these Stations."<sup>38</sup> Congress thought that the pay increase necessitated an enlarged stewardship. Hancock was assuring Washington that even though the distribution of chaplains was not as the General desired, Congress agreed on the importance of procuring competent clergymen to fill such important positions.

"It is certain that Religion and Morality have no less obligation upon Armies than upon Cities," Adams wrote in 1777, "and contribute no less to the Happiness of Soldiers than of Citizens."<sup>39</sup> This statement aptly describes the way America's Revolutionary leadership approached the task of developing a collection of colonial volunteers into a professional army. While they utilized European military strategy and methods of

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:390, 14:978; This change in the distribution of chaplains in the army resulted in several chaplains' requests to serve being denied, see *Ibid.*, 14:773.

<sup>37</sup> Washington to Hancock, June 8, 1777, *PGW-RWS*, 9:644-645.

<sup>38</sup> Hancock to Washington, May 27, 1777, *PGW-RWS*, 9:540.

<sup>39</sup> Adams to Greene, June 2, 1777, *PNG*, 2:102.

discipline, they also relied heavily upon the power of religious rhetoric to inspire and reform American soldiers. Ultimately, Congress and the army's generals not only expected chaplains to act as agents of moral reform by inspiring better behavior in the army, but also to continually persuade Americans that the war was worth fighting. The Revolutionary leadership perceived that the majority of Americans possessed a non-secular, essentially Christian worldview and that they would accordingly respond to religious rhetoric. This perception was displayed by Congress and the army's generals in the high level of confidence they placed in chaplains to keep Americans in the war.

## Chapter 5: Congressional Prayer

Though the legislative assemblies of the individual American colonies traditionally opened with prayer, when the Continental Congress first met in 1774, they did not. Rather, the delegates made prayer the subject of one of their first debates. As John Adams recalled the occasion, “Mr. [Thomas] Cushing made a Motion, that [Congress] should be opened with Prayer. It was opposed by Mr. [John] Jay of N. York and Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina, because we were so divided in religious Sentiments...so that We could not join in the same Act of Worship.” Samuel Adams then spoke and asserted that he was “no Bigot, and could hear a Prayer from a Gentleman of Piety and Virtue, who was at the same Time a Friend to his Country” and suggested that Jacob Duché was such a man.<sup>1</sup> The other delegates accepted this reasoning and invited Duché to pray in Congress the following day. Thus, the selection of Duché by Congress as its first chaplain was based as much upon his political views as it was upon his personal piety and virtue.

Congressional prayer during the Revolution was similarly motivated by both religious and political factors. This chapter examines the political aspects of the practice. Simply asking why Congress prayed is not enough. In order to fully understand what congressional prayer meant to the leadership of the Revolution, it is essential to also ask *how* Congress prayed and what type of responses prayer evoked from the delegates. Such queries reveal that the political motivations behind congressional prayer during the Revolution included the promotion of civil discourse among the delegates, the

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<sup>1</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, 16 September 1774, *AFP*.

reinforcement of the Revolution's religious symbolism, and the establishment of greater unity among the colonists.

The prayers spoken in the Continental Congress can be organized into two categories: recited prayers and individualized prayers. Recited prayers were those read out of a denomination's standard prayer book. Individualized prayers were those a chaplain composed or offered extemporaneously. Of these two varieties, the recited prayers were the most common, but it was the individualized prayers most frequently remarked upon by the delegates in their personal correspondence.

The text of most of the individualized prayers offered in Congress has not survived. Besides the first congressional prayer in 1774, the only surviving text of individualized congressional prayers are those included in published fast day sermons. Historians, then, must look to other sources to understand what prayer meant to Congress. The *Journals of the Continental Congress* are one such source, and aid in reconstructing the circumstances in which these prayers were offered. Another is the personal correspondence of congressional delegates, which provides insight into how such prayers were generally received.

In Jacob Duché, Congress had a chaplain who was skilled at both types of prayer. Born in 1737, Duché studied at the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania) and was a member of its first graduating class. "He has distinguished himself as a scholar and orator, on many public occasions," the president of the college, Reverend William Smith, wrote of Duché, "and from the most disinterested motives has

devoted himself to the church.”<sup>2</sup> After graduation and a brief period of study in England, Duché was appointed an assistant minister at Christ Church in Philadelphia, and eventually its rector. His extemporaneous preaching and masterful recitation of the liturgy attracted large congregations, and earned him renown throughout the area.<sup>3</sup> Duché thus came to Congress as a seasoned and expert giver of prayers.

The first congressional prayer spoken by Duché was part recited and part individualized, and provides an excellent example of each. Duché began by reading the Anglican collect designated for September 7 in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which began with the 35<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The language of this particular psalm was coincidentally appropriate to the imperial crisis that brought about the formation of Congress in the first place. Its opening lines read:

Plead my cause, Oh, Lord, with them that strive with me, fight against them that fight against me. Take hold of buckler and shield, and rise up for my help. Draw also the spear and the battle-axe to meet those who pursue me; Say to my soul, 'I am your salvation.' Let those be ashamed and dishonored who seek my life; Let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Duffield Neill, “Jacob Duché: The First Chaplain of Congress,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 2, no. 1 (1878): 58-73. The quote is on page 60 and is from Rev. Smith in a letter of recommendation to the administration at Cambridge University.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 35: 1-4, 20; *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: 1662), 24, in Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Library, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rft\\_id=xri:eebo:citation:99897619](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99897619).

The collect continues in this same theme, calling upon God for deliverance from those who “devise deceitful matters against them that are quiet in the land.”<sup>5</sup>

The collect’s application to the colonies’ struggles with Great Britain would not have been lost on the delegates, many of whom suspected a conspiracy in Parliament aimed at stripping the colonists of their rights as Englishmen. There is also every reason to think that it was expertly recited, given Duché’s reputation as an orator.<sup>6</sup> But the subject of the psalm and Duché’s eloquent recital were just the beginning.

To the surprise of all present, when Duché finished reading the collect he began to pray extemporaneously. Addressing God, Duché beseeched Him to “look down on mercy...on these our American States, who have fled to Thee from the rod of the oppressor...[and] to Thee have they appealed for the righteousness of their cause.” Regarding Congress, he prayed God to “direct the councils of this honorable assembly,” and to “shower down on them and the millions they here represent, such temporal blessings as Thou seest expedient for them in this world and crown them with everlasting glory in the world to come.” As for the British, he asked God to “defeat the malicious designs of our cruel adversaries” and to “convince them of the unrighteousness of their cause” that they may no longer “persist in their sanguinary purposes.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Neill, “Jacob Duché: The First Chaplain of Congress,” 58-65; James B. Bell, *A War of Religion: Dissenters, Anglicans, and the American Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 179.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 3. The full text of Duché’s prayer can also be located on the official website of the Office of the Chaplain, United States House of Representatives under the title “The First Prayer of the Continental Congress, 1774”, <http://chaplain.house.gov/archive/continental.html>.

Duché's prayer is a prime example of how providential language was utilized to squarely frame the imperial crisis in a good-evil dichotomy. While he depicted Congress as an "honourable assembly" appealing to God "for the righteousness of their cause," the British were described as "unrighteous," "malicious," and "sanguinary." Condemning British policy in such conspiratorial terms was by no means unheard of at this time, but Duché's language set him squarely against the decision he had made earlier that year with several other prominent Anglican ministers to remain loyal to the British government.<sup>8</sup> By decrying the actions and intents of George III and Parliament toward the colonies in his prayer, Duché established himself as one of the most outspoken patriots of all Anglican clergymen in America at that time.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, many of the colonial elite who shared this extreme patriotic view of the conflict were present when he prayed, thus Duché's bold condemnation of Great Britain and liberal praise of Congress were certain to endear him to many of the delegates.

The delegates' response to Duché's prayer was, in fact, extremely positive. For instance, John Adams wrote that the prayer "filled the Bosom of every Man present," that he had "never heard a better Prayer or one so well pronounced...with such fervour, such Ardor, such Earnestness and Pathos, and in Language so elegant and sublime- for America, for the Congress, for The Province of Massachusetts Bay, and especially the Town of Boston," and that it "had an excellent Effect upon every Body [there]."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In 1774, Myles Cooper, then president of Kings College, as well as Rev. Jonathan Boucher and Henry Addison of Maryland, visited Philadelphia to confer with Duché and other Anglican ministers there to discuss the conflict between the colonies and their parent government; see Neill, "Rev. Jacob Duché," 63.

<sup>9</sup> A chart depicting the political allegiance of each Anglican minister in America during the Revolution can be found in Bell, *A War of Religion*, 222-240.

<sup>10</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, September 16, 1774, *AFP*.

Samuel Adams agreed with his cousin's evaluation, and wrote to Joseph Warren that Duché "made a most excellent extemporaneous prayer, by which he discovered himself to be a gentleman of sense and piety, and a warm advocate for the religious and civil rights of America."<sup>11</sup>

Duché's prayer was so well received that he accepted the invitation from the President of Congress, Peyton Randolph, to serve as the assembly's chaplain. His primary duty as chaplain was the daily reading of prayers in Congress, though he was also asked to preach before the delegates on special occasions. Several days after Duché began reading prayers in Congress, Joseph Reed, a delegate from Pennsylvania, commented that as a Congress, they "never were guilty of a more Masterly Stroke of Policy, than in moving that Mr. Duché might read Prayers, it has had a very good Effect, &c."<sup>12</sup>

Both John Adams and Reed spoke of the "effect" Duché's prayers had on Congress. But whereas Adams spoke in terms of the delegates' reactions to the first extemporaneous prayer, Reed spoke more of their general response to Duché's prayers over the period of several days. What Reed described as a "masterful stroke of policy" was the appointment of Duché as chaplain and to commence each congressional meeting with prayer. Thus, the "very good effect" Reed said resulted from Duché's prayers pertained to the way Congress was functioning as a result. Abraham Clark similarly credited Duché with enabling Congress to work more effectively. Clark admitted several

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Adams to Joseph Warren, September 9, 1774, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:26-27.

<sup>12</sup> John Adams Diary 22, September 10, 1774, *AFP*.

years later that he at first doubted whether many of his fellow delegates would tolerate being led in prayer by an Anglican chaplain, but was both relieved and impressed at Duché's unique ability to compose "a form of Prayer Unexceptionable to all parties."<sup>13</sup>

Many delegates viewed the promotion of civil discourse in Congress one of the chief benefits of congressional prayer. Though all the delegates agreed that the colonies should resist British taxation, they did not always agree on the form and scope this resistance should take. For instance, the debate in Congress over prayer was only the second it had experienced. The first had concluded moments earlier and centered on the assembly's mode of voting, primarily whether each colony would receive an equal number of votes or if voting was to be determined by a colony's "importance."<sup>14</sup> Thomas Cushing motioned for Congress to begin each morning with prayer immediately following this heated debate, which suggests that he intended it as a way of decreasing hostility and increasing cordiality among the delegates. Fifteen years later during the Constitutional Convention, a similar experience occurred. Benjamin Franklin attempted to restore civility to a heated debate by motioning that the convention open each day with prayer, reminding the assembly that the practice had worked to this end in Congress during the Revolution.<sup>15</sup> To many, increased civility among the delegates was reason enough to pray in Congress.

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<sup>13</sup> Abraham Clark to the Rev. James Caldwell, August 2, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 4:605.

<sup>14</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 1:25.

<sup>15</sup> *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, ed. Jonathan Elliot, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1907), 5:253-255. Franklin's motion that the convention pray was subsequently debated and it was stated that the reason prayer had not hitherto been called for was because the convention had no funds with which to procure a chaplain. The motion was debated and several delegates objected that to start inviting a clergyman to pray at that point in the

But civil discourse was not the only consideration. Congress prayed to help legitimize its authority as a legislative body. When the Continental Congress convened in 1774, it was not by the authority or direction of each colony's government. Rather, delegates were selected in some colonies by the governor, in others by the colonial assembly, and in still others by committees in certain districts or counties.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Congress could not accurately claim to have been created strictly by the voice of the people or by a collection of the colonial governments. Even if the Congress had been created by the governments of each colony, their authority to do so was questionable. Thus, appeals made in prayers to the "King of kings, and Lord of lords who...reignest with power supreme and uncontrolled over all the Kingdoms, Empires and Governments,"<sup>17</sup> served both to request God's interposition on America's behalf, and to portray Congress as a legislative body authorized to govern by divine authority.

By portraying Congress as a divinely appointed assembly, the delegates reinforced the religious symbolism they had ascribed to the Revolution. Hence, Congress depicted itself as defending both the civil and Christian liberties of Americans, and in doing so made the distinctions between the two more ambiguous. If Americans at that time viewed the Revolution as a war between good and evil, and America represented the good, then Congress naturally appeared as a legislative body directed by God. Congressional prayer only bolstered this image.

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convention would signal to those outside that there was severe contention and would also put the secrecy in which their deliberations were held in jeopardy. The convention adjourned without voting on Franklin's motion.

<sup>16</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 1:14-24.

<sup>17</sup> Duché, "The First Prayer of the Continental Congress, 1774."

Prayer at nine o'clock each morning became routine for Congress. Duché would read the collect of scripture and prayer designated in the *Book of Common Prayer*, afterwhich Congress would proceed with the day's business. However, certain occasions called for less-routine religious observance, such as the congressionally appointed fast day in July 1775. As congressional chaplain, Duché was invited to lead Congress in religious worship on such days.

The individualized prayer Duché offered before his fast day sermon in 1775 was consistent with both the spiritual and political purposes of fast days. As religious exercises, fast days were intended to bring people together in a concert of fasting and prayer, and for them to ask forgiveness for their collective sins and the removal of divine displeasure. Accordingly, Duché pleaded for forgiveness on behalf of all Americans so that "the infliction of national punishments upon national guilt" would cease. Referencing the "covenant theology" common throughout the colonies, he prayed for God to "put a stop to the unnatural effusion of Christian blood." Finally, he appealed to God for unity, not only among the colonists, but also with their "brethren" across the Atlantic.<sup>18</sup>

The language of Duché's prayer is significant for several reasons. By referring to a "national punishment" for "national sins," Duché portrayed the colonists as a united people. By bemoaning the loss of American soldiers on the field of battle as the loss of "Christian blood," he identified the main source of American unity: Christianity. To Duché, the colonists not only shared a continent, but a religion, at least its basic elements.

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<sup>18</sup> Jacob Duché, *The American Vine* (Philadelphia: 1775), iii-vii.

Congress apparently did not object to the way the chaplain portrayed America. In fact, the message of the prayer and of the sermon that followed boded well with Congress, which had only positive things to say about the service and the observation of the fast in general.<sup>19</sup> The text of the prayer was included in the sermon's publication later that year, giving the ideological ramifications of Duché's prayer on American unity a much larger audience.<sup>20</sup>

After observing the fast day, Congress returned to its routine of Duché reading prayers each morning. During the next year, the delegates wrote little in their correspondence about the prayers offered in Congress. They occasionally mentioned Duché, but said nothing about specific prayers. What exactly caused their reticence on the matter is hard to determine. Perhaps as a daily occurrence, prayer seemed to the delegates an unremarkable, mundane ritual. This is not to suggest that the importance of prayer to Congress had diminished, but that its novelty may have worn off. Perhaps Duché's recitation from the *Book of Common Prayer* gave the delegates no reason to write home about prayers their correspondents could easily have read or heard on the same date. Both possibilities are reasonable, but there is no way of knowing for sure. Nevertheless, events in the latter half of 1776 brought significant change to the way Congress prayed.

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<sup>19</sup> Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, 20 July 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:640; Connecticut Delegates to John Trumbull, Sr., 22 July 1775, *Ibid.*, 1:647

<sup>20</sup> *The American Vine* was first published by the Philadelphia printer James Humphrey in 1775, and subsequent editions by Benjamin Franklin which attests to the esteem in which Franklin held Duché's sermon.

The prayers recited from the *Book of Common Prayer* were altered when independence was declared in July 1776. Duché and other leaders at Christ Church in Philadelphia responded to the Declaration of Independence with a declaration of their own, resolving to “omit those petitions in the Liturgy wherein the King of Great Britain is prayed for.”<sup>21</sup> By doing so, Duché went expressly against the oath he made when ordained a minister of the Church of England. He had frequently warned in his sermons and prayers of the previous two years that George III and Parliament were in danger of losing the favor of Providence if they persisted in their “sanguinary” and “malicious designs.” The deletion of George III from his copy of the *Book of Common Prayer* was Duché’s way of signifying to American Episcopalians that Great Britain had indeed lost the favor of providence and that they no longer should pray for its government’s success.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Duché resigned as Congressional Chaplain. Citing poor health and a need to focus on his parochial duties, he informed Congress in October 1776 that he could no longer fulfill the role.<sup>23</sup> He remained an ardent patriot until September 1777, when the British occupied Philadelphia. While others fled the city, Duché remained. With British officers in his congregation on the first Sunday after occupation, he reverted to the established form of worship and prayed for the king. However, this gesture was not enough to appease the British. When he exited the church after the service, he was

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<sup>21</sup> Neill, “Jacob Duché: The First Chaplain of Congress,” 66-67. Duché wasted no time in announcing this liturgical change, which he did on July 4, 1776.

<sup>22</sup> Congress approved of Duché’s alteration to the standard form of prayer and many delegates mailed copies of the altered form to friends at home. For example, see Thomas Jefferson to John Page, August 5, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 4:623.

<sup>23</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 6:886-887.

instantly arrested by a British officer. He was only held captive for one night, but left his patriotism in his cell that day. A month later, Duché wrote to George Washington and urged him to “represent to Congress the indispensable necessity of rescinding the hasty and ill-advised declaration of independency” and to recommend “an immediate cessation of hostilities.”<sup>24</sup> Washington forwarded the letter to Congress, and when its contents were leaked to the public, Duché was deemed a traitor and fled to England, sailing in the company of Lord Cornwallis.

Was Duché really a traitor, or was he duped by the British? The evidence supports the former conclusion. In his letter to Washington, Duché explained that he was a supporter of American liberties, but was apprehensive about American Independence and that this had contributed to his resignation in October 1776. Duché’s actions, however, put this explanation into question. It was Duché that eagerly announced on July 4, 1776 that the King’s name was to be omitted from the Anglican liturgy, and he continued to preach on the religious merits of the Revolution to his congregation (comprised largely of patriots) even after his resignation from the chaplaincy. Duché’s participation in Congress left him vulnerable to charges of treason and of being removed from the clergy of the Church of England. It seems that once captured, Duché feared for both his life and livelihood, both of which could be spared if he exhibited a restored loyalty to Great Britain.<sup>25</sup> The man once so highly praised by the delegates in Congress was now labeled an “apostate,” and “the first of Villains.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jacob Duché to George Washington, October 8, 1777, *PGW-RWS*, 11:430-436. Some delegates suggested that Duché’s letter was dictated by General Howe and then written in Duché’s hand, see *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 8:155.

<sup>25</sup> The details of Duché’s defection are briefly discussed in several secondary sources, but among the earliest and most thorough is Neill, “Jacob Duché: The First Chaplain of Congress.” Duché discreetly returned to Philadelphia in 1792, and quietly lived there until his death in 1798.

Prior to his defection, Duché's resignation left Congress without a chaplain for a little over a month. In December 1776, the motion was passed to appoint two chaplains instead of one. A week later, the delegates elected Reverend Patrick Alison, a Presbyterian minister, and Reverend William White, an Anglican minister and eventually Duché's successor as rector of Christ Church. White accepted the appointment, but Allison declined and Reverend George Duffield, another Presbyterian minister, was appointed in his stead. Both men fit the two criteria for congressional chaplains as unofficially outlined by Samuel Adams in 1774: piety and patriotism. Because Duffield was serving as a chaplain in the Continental Army at the time, he was unable to begin praying in Congress until October 1777.<sup>27</sup>

Why did Congress decide to appoint two chaplains in the place of one? In part, splitting the duties of the chaplaincy between two clergymen eased the burden either might feel in addition to his own parochial duties. But it was also an opportunity for Congress to employ a chaplain from a different denomination and in doing so, send an important message to its constituents.

The appointment of two chaplains from different denominations was a gesture directed more to the public than to the delegates. While at first it might appear that Congress appointed dual chaplains to better represent the denominational diversity of its own membership, this was not likely a major consideration. After all, up until Duché's resignation in 1776, Congress had been content to hear an Anglican minister to read the

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<sup>26</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, October 25, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 8:179, and John Penn to Richard Coswell, October 21, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 8:155.

<sup>27</sup> *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 9:822.

daily prayers designated in the Anglican prayer book. After the debate over congressional prayer in 1774, no delegate objected to the fact that just one denomination was represented in the congressional chaplaincy. Rather, Duché remained so popular with Congress that when his health prevented him from continuing as chaplain, the delegates voted unanimously to reward him with a payment of 150 dollars “for the devout and acceptable manner in which he discharged his duty during the time he officiated as chaplain.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, its own denominational composition was not the primary consideration when Congress appointed dual-chaplains.

The primary reason Congress decided to appoint two chaplains from different denominations was to help preserve unity among its constituents. Between 1774 and 1776, the only occasions upon which a non-Anglican clergyman led congressional prayer was when Congress engaged in public worship. On its appointed fast days in 1775 and 1776, Congress met in the morning to be led in worship by Duché at Christ Church, and again in the evening to worship with Reverend Alison at his Presbyterian church.<sup>29</sup> That Congress was content to be led in prayer by only one chaplain when it was in session, but insisted on diversifying its worship when in public reveals its concern over the way its religiosity was perceived by its constituents. After carefully tailoring the religious language in its fast day proclamations to transcend denominational differences, it took measures such as this to ensure that their public actions matched their rhetoric.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9:887. Duché subsequently donated the money to widows of Pennsylvania soldiers killed in the war.

<sup>29</sup> John Hancock to the New York Committee of Safety, July 20, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:638.

Religious leaders in Philadelphia were well aware that colonial unity rested in large part on friendly relations between members of different denominations. In May 1775, the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia advised the congregations under its governance that in order to preserve “the union which at present subsists through all the colonies...a spirit of candour, charity, and mutual esteem, [should] be preserved and promoted towards those of different religious denominations.”<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Thomas Paine urged Americans in his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, to focus on the commonalities of the many denominations and not the differences. “I look on the various denominations among us,” Paine declared, “to be like children of the same family, differing only in what is called their Christian names.”<sup>31</sup> Congress was likewise aware of the delicacy with which the multiple denominations needed to be treated, as indicated by the form of their public worship.

In order to avoid the perception of favoring one denomination above all others, Congress worshiped with a variety of denominations on fast and thanksgiving days. The perception that it favored one sect over all others threatened all their efforts to unify the colonists. As most denominations in Revolutionary America generally experienced popularity in certain regions, the appearance of Congress favoring one denomination over all others could easily have been construed as favoring a particular region or colony. Furthermore, if the citizens of a dissenting denomination felt that the Anglican Church would serve as the government’s official religion after the Revolution, they would have been less likely to have supported it. When Congress prayed in private, it was to promote

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<sup>30</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1706-1788* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 468.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 1:37.

civil discourse and reaffirm the notion that its authority to govern and wage war against their parent state was God-given. When Congress prayed in public, it took into consideration the way its religiosity would be perceived by its constituents.

The appointment of a Presbyterian chaplain also affected the method in which Congress prayed. As an Anglican, White continued to read prayers out of the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*. As a Presbyterian, Duffield had no liturgical constraints on how he prayed. In fact, over the previous century the sect had displayed a strong aversion to recited prayers altogether, considering them an uninspired remnant of Catholicism. Presbyterian ministers did have the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which provided a few guidelines for praying and directing other religious services, but contained no prayers to be read verbatim.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the appointment of both a Presbyterian and Anglican chaplain by Congress meant fewer recited congressional prayers and more of the individualized variety. Unfortunately, no record of Duffield's prayers has been preserved. An examination of what is known about Duffield's character and religious practice, however, facilitates speculation of his congressional prayers' content.

A native of Pennsylvania, Duffield entered the clergy as a zealot for the New Light Presbyterian denomination, which embraced the revivals and circuit preaching that characterized the Great Awakening. His popularity increased as he moved to larger congregations every few years before being appointed to the prominent pastorate at Philadelphia's Third Presbyterian Church in 1772. By 1777, Duffield had earned a reputation throughout the middle colonies as an eloquent preacher, particularly when it

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<sup>32</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (London: 1646), in Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Library, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rft\\_id=xri:eebo:citation:99861796](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99861796)

came to explaining the Revolution's religious importance. In fact, in July 1775 he and several other ministers in Pennsylvania wrote a letter to Presbyterian clergy in North Carolina who were reluctant to join the conflict on the colonists' side.<sup>33</sup>

Duffield embraced republican thought and often viewed the Bible through a republican lens, frequently comparing the conflict between America and Great Britain to the House of Israel, their exodus from Egypt, and journey to the "Promised Land."<sup>34</sup> Adams, who seems to have enjoyed tasting sermons like other men enjoyed tasting wines, wrote on more than one occasion that Duffield at least matched, if not exceeded, the clergy of New England in both eloquence and preaching ability.<sup>35</sup> Surely Duffield exhibited this same eloquence and belief in America's providential destiny in his individualized prayers before Congress. Congress clearly approved of the way in which he fulfilled his duties, as both he and White served as chaplains to Congress until the end of the war and prayer remained a staple of congressional proceedings throughout the Revolution.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A copy of this letter can be found in the *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 52, no. 4 (1974): 388-393.

<sup>34</sup> George Duffield, *A Sermon Preached in the Third Presbyterian Church in the City of Philadelphia, on Thursday December 11, 1783* (Philadelphia: 1783).

<sup>35</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, September 16, 1774, *AFP*. Adams wrote in his diary on September 17, 1775 that he had heard a Rev. Sproat preach and that he was "totally destitute of the Genius and Eloquence of Duffil [Duffield]," see John Adams Diary 24, *AFP*.

<sup>36</sup> Both Duffield and White remained influential religious figures after the Revolution. White became the first American Bishop of the Episcopal Church in 1789. Duffield remained prominent in the American Presbyterian Church before he died in 1794. Despite the increase in individualized prayers that accompanied Duffield's appointment, the delegates still wrote very little about the prayers they heard in Congress. Again, this could be because the frequency of congressional prayer turned it into a mundane ritual or merely a part of traditional legislative procedure. It is hard to know for sure. But the congressional record and what did make it into the delegates' personal letters make one thing clear: prayer was an important element of their legislative proceedings during the Revolution.

Prayer mattered to Congress, and Congress thought its prayers mattered to Americans. Historians asserting that incidents of congressional prayer merely attest to a high level of congressional piety neglect the practice's political elements and therefore arrive at one-dimensional and misleading conclusions. This is not to say Congress impious, or to accuse its delegates of insincerity. It simply means that there is more to the equation than just religious belief. Congressional prayer was both religious and political at once. When Congress prayed for divine intervention in their Revolutionary cause, it was also praying as a means to preserve civility and unity among its own membership, and in part to inspire the same among its constituents. The confidence Congress placed in the political efficacy of prayer, like their confidence in fast days and military chaplains, was informed by their perceptions of their constituents' religiosity.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis examines the complex motives and meanings surrounding the extensive use of religious language and biblical symbolism by America's Revolutionary leadership. Fast days, army chaplains, and congressional prayer provide the clearest examples of how these men intermingled religious and political rhetoric. In each instance, America's founders displayed an appreciation for the art of publicity and the power of persuasion, using religious rhetoric to elicit patriotic responses and to encourage patriotic behavior. By depicting the Revolution as a watershed moment in both the political and religious history of mankind, the Revolutionary leadership conflated patriotism with obedience to God. They did not rely on religious rhetoric alone to persuade Americans to support the Revolution, but such language figured prominently throughout the entire war.

Clearly, the founders perceived that religion mattered to Americans; that their constituents possessed a world view that was essentially Christian. This perception did not necessarily entail a belief that most Americans were active church-goers or that they strictly lived the tenets of their faiths. Rather, it was primarily based upon the belief that most Americans held a non-secular understanding of their lives, the world and their place in it. Hence, America's founders spoke to their fellow countrymen in language that would resonate with such views, indicating their awareness that people are more thoroughly persuaded of a war's merits when it is publicized in terms that matter to them.

What implications does this conclusion have for the larger political and religious history of the United States? Placing the founders' public statements which use religious

language into their full political context calls into question the use of such statements by many historians engaged in the Christian Nation debate. Because members of America's Revolutionary leadership were often influenced simultaneously by political and religious considerations, historians must account for the full context of these statements when using them to advance their arguments, which has too often not been the case.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, this thesis shows that many of the founders' expressions of religious belief, particularly those directed at the general public, typically reveal more about their perceptions of American religiosity during the Revolution than they do about their own individual beliefs.

An investigation into the founders' use of religious rhetoric in prosecuting the War for Independence, naturally produces additional questions. Chief among these queries is whether or not the Revolutionary leadership's perception of American religiosity was correct. This question can be answered in large part by examining Americans' responses to the religious language intended to persuade them to greater patriotism. For instance, how well were Revolutionary fast days observed by most Americans? What did soldiers in the Continental Army think about their chaplains, and to what extent could their chaplains really be credited with keeping Americans in the army? Did prayer matter to most Americans, and did they really care whether or not Congress prayed? These are all important questions because they help us gauge whether or not the founders' were accurate in their assessment of what most Americans believed.

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of historians citing the founders' use of religious rhetoric without considering the full political context in which they spoke, refer to chapter 2 of this thesis, in which the subject's historiography and ideological underpinnings are explained.

Determining the details of American religious belief at the time of the Revolution has long proven an especially elusive task for historians. Because most Americans living at that time did not leave a written record describing their faith, historians must rely on alternative sources. While we do not have written records of most Americans' inner thoughts and beliefs, we do have a record of their public behavior. After identifying the confidence America's political leadership placed in the power of certain language to persuade Americans to rally to the patriotic cause, we can then examine whether or not such language was effective. Doing so will grant us greater access into the minds of average Americans. Such an extension of this study will not necessarily paint a definitive portrait of American religiosity at the time of the country's founding, but it will make it considerably clearer than it has hitherto been. Discovering what the founders' thought Americans believed, as this thesis does, is an important step in grasping this bigger, more complete picture.

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Appendix 1: William Hooper's Draft of the 1775 Fast Day Proclamation

From Paul H. Smith, et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1976), 1:455-456.

Resolved that it be and hereby it is recommended to the Inhabitants of the united Colonies in America of all Denominations That Thursday the 20th day of July next be set apart as a day of public humiliation fasting and prayer, that a total Abstence from Servile labor and recreation be observed and all their religious Assemblies Solemnly Convened to humble themselves before God under the heavy Judgments felt and threatened to confess our manifold Sins, to implore the forgiveness of Heaven, (that a sincere repentance reformation may influence our future Conduct) and that a Blessing may descend on the husbandry, Manufactures & other lawful Employments of this people and especially that the Union of these American Colonies in defence of their Just Rights & priviledges may be preserved, confirmed and prospered, that the Congresses may be inspired with Wisdom, that Great Britain and its Rulers may have their eyes opened to discern the things that shall make for the peace and Happiness of the Nation and all its Connections And that America may soon behold a Gracious interposition of Heaven for the redress of her many Grievances, the restoration of her invaded Liberties, a reconciliation with the parent State upon terms Constitutional and Honourable to them both and the Security of them to the latest posterity.

Appendix 2: Proclamation of a Day of Fasting and Humiliation, 1775

From Worthington C. Ford et al., eds, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, D.C., 1904-37), 2:87-88.

As the great Governor of the World, by his supreme and universal Providence, not only conducts the course of nature with unerring wisdom and rectitude, but frequently influences the minds of men to serve the wise and gracious purposes of his providential government; and it being, at all times, our indispensable duty devoutly to acknowledge his superintending providence, especially in times of impending danger and public calamity, to reverence and adore his immutable justice as well as to implore his merciful interposition for our deliverance:

This Congress, therefore, considering the present critical, alarming and calamitous state of these colonies, do earnestly recommend that Thursday, the 20th day of July next, be observed, by the inhabitants of all the English colonies on this continent, as a day of public humiliation, fasting and prayer; that we may, with united hearts and voices, unfeignedly confess and deplore our many sins; and offer up our joint supplications to the all-wise, omnipotent, and merciful Disposer of all events; humbly beseeching him to forgive our iniquities, to remove our present calamities, to avert those desolating judgments, with which we are threatened, and to bless our rightful sovereign, King George the third, and inspire him with wisdom to discern and pursue the true interest of all his subjects, that a speedy end may be put to the civil discord between Great Britain and the American colonies, without farther effusion of blood: And that the British nation may be influenced to regard the things that belong to her peace, before they are hid from

her eyes: That these colonies may be ever under the care and protection of a kind Providence, and be prospered in all their interests; That the divine blessing may descend and rest upon all our civil rulers, and upon the representatives of the people, in their several assemblies and conventions, that they may be directed to wise and effectual measures for preserving the union, and securing the just rights and priviledges of the colonies; That virtue and true religion may revive and flourish throughout our land; And that all America may soon behold a gracious interposition of Heaven, for the redress of her many grievances, the restoration of her invaded rights, a reconciliation with the parent state, on terms constitutional and honorable to both; And that her civil and religious priviledges may be secured to the latest posterity.

And it is recommended to Christians, of all denominations, to assemble for public worship, and to abstain from servile labour and recreations on said day.

Appendix 3: The First Prayer of the Continental Congress, 1774

From Office of the Chaplain, United States House of Representatives,  
<http://chaplain.house.gov/archive/continental.html>

O Lord our Heavenly Father, high and mighty King of kings, and Lord of lords, who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers on earth and reignest with power supreme and uncontrolled over all the Kingdoms, Empires and Governments; look down in mercy, we beseech Thee, on these our American States, who have fled to Thee from the rod of the oppressor and thrown themselves on Thy gracious protection, desiring to be henceforth dependent only on Thee. To Thee have they appealed for the righteousness of their cause; to Thee do they now look up for that countenance and support, which Thou alone canst give. Take them, therefore, Heavenly Father, under Thy nurturing care; give them wisdom in Council and valor in the field; defeat the malicious designs of our cruel adversaries; convince them of the unrighteousness of their Cause and if they persist in their sanguinary purposes, of own unerring justice, sounding in their hearts, constrain them to drop the weapons of war from their unnerved hands in the day of battle!

Be Thou present, O God of wisdom, and direct the councils of this honorable assembly; enable them to settle things on the best and surest foundation. That the scene of blood may be speedily closed; that order, harmony and peace may be effectually restored, and truth and justice, religion and piety, prevail and flourish amongst the people. Preserve the health of their bodies and vigor of their minds; shower down on them and the millions they here represent, such temporal blessings as Thou seest expedient for them in this

world and crown them with everlasting glory in the world to come. All this we ask in the name and through the merits of Jesus Christ, Thy Son and our Savior. Amen.

## Vita

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