

“With a Firm Reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence”

On “We the People – The Constitution Matters,” my Friday morning radio show on [WFYL AM1180 radio](#), we’ve been picking apart and discussing each of the principles of government we find imbedded in the Declaration of Independence. It has been a wonderful, rewarding project. We studied each and every principle we discovered, whether part of Jefferson’s original thoughts or a result of the final “wordsmithing” by the Congress. These foundational principles are easy to discern, and it is equally easy to see their importance to the success of republican government. On the other hand, it has been quite disconcerting to realize the extent to which we have departed from these principles and, as we look around the American landscape today, to see the results of doing so.

These many principles of government, principles that even define our human existence, are as true today as they were in 1776; principles, like John Adams’ facts, are “stubborn things.” During the Founding Period the principles were readily accepted – they were interwoven into American society. You encountered them in letters, speeches, essays, and newspaper articles of the time. Today -- not so much. Today, they have largely been replaced by the principles of humanism, progressivism and globalism.

Although some of these principles were hotly debated at the time, such as whether a strong national government or a loose confederation of sovereign states, or some combination of both, was the better form of government for the united States, other principles were accepted as self-evident truths, such as that God was the source of unalienable rights and that He oversaw the affairs of men.

We knew there would come a time when we would find ourselves at the end of the document; it was inevitable; that is where I find myself today.

After laying out the colonists’ philosophy of government, rehashing the complaints the colonists had repeatedly expressed to King and Parliament, and showing how a break in their political bands was both necessary and appropriate, the Declaration concludes with these words:

“And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

But as presented to Congress by the committee on 28 June, the second clause (“with a firm reliance...”) was absent. It had not been in Jefferson’s rough draft, nor had it been added by anyone on the committee. Jefferson had written:

“And for the support of this Declaration, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

While Jefferson later in life complained that Congress had “mangled” his work, in this specific case, I believe the additional clause was a great improvement. The added clause contains a key principle of colonial thought and deserves discussion even today.

But if Mr. Jefferson did not intend the colonists to proclaim “a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence,” who did? There are fifty-one candidates.

Perhaps it was New Jersey delegate and Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon, whose 1776 sermon "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," widely published in the colonies, brought him enough attention to be appointed a delegate to this Second Continental Congress. Serving as President of the College of New Jersey (later, Princeton) from 1768 to 1779, Witherspoon had taught such prominent men as future President James Madison, future Vice-President Aaron Burr, nine cabinet officers, 21 senators, 39 congressmen, three justices of the Supreme Court, and 12 state governors.

Perhaps it was Massachusetts delegate Robert Treat Paine, who would go on to serve as a military chaplain during the war. Perhaps it was Georgia delegate and ordained minister, Lyman Hall. New Jersey delegate Francis Hopkinson was a church music director and choir leader who had edited a famous American hymnbook. I could see him suggesting the new clause. Connecticut delegate Roger Sherman had trained as a minister and had written the doctrinal creed for his denomination, a creed that no doubt contained a similar sentiment. Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Rush began the first Sunday School in America and founded the country's first Bible Society; his co-delegate, James Wilson, was trained as a clergyman before leaving Scotland for the new world. In fact, at least 29 of the Declaration's signers had been educated in schools whose primary and declared purpose was the preparation of Christian ministers. But the phrase need not have been suggested by someone with a strong Christian faith. A belief in divine providence was commonplace.

Whoever added the clause will forever remain a mystery, since no notes survived of the day's deliberations. But what of the thought the clause contains? Did the fifty-six men who signed the Declaration indeed share a “firm reliance on the protection of divine providence?”

Jefferson called his essay “*an expression of the American Mind,*” an amalgamation of the “*harmonizing sentiments of the day.*” The entire Congress had participated in the editing. If the protection of divine providence had not been a widely shared sentiment,

it is unlikely it would have been suggested, or retained. I believe it safe to conclude that these men did indeed feel it appropriate to call on God's protection in this way.

Were they justified in doing so?

An honest appraisal of early American history is replete with examples of individuals and groups calling upon God for favor, guidance and protection, from the first settlers to the first Congress. The settlers were, by and large, Christians who understood their covenantal relationship with the Creator of the universe. They asked for, they expected, and they received, God's protection.

The first official act of the Jamestown settlers in 1607 was to erect a cross at Cape Henry and thank God for their successful crossing.

The first session of the First Continental Congress in 1774 opened with this prayer:

"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 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 ... All this we ask in the name, and through the merits of Jesus Christ thy Son and our Savior. Amen"

Protection or provision, both were part and parcel of God's providential care.

There was perhaps no greater single beneficiary of that providence than General George Washington himself. Whether it took the form of an inexplicable fog that enabled the successful withdrawal of his forces from Long Island, the sudden snowstorm that kept Hessian troops hunkered down in their quarters at Trenton, or the run of shad that fed his desperate troops at Valley Forge, Washington experienced repeated examples of divine providence. In a 1778 letter to Thomas Nelson, he wrote: "The Hand of providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations."¹

We do not have the time here to recount the many, many examples of divine providence in the history of colonial America. I refer you to books like: "America's Providential History," by Stephen McDowell and Mark Beliles; "The Light and the Glory,"

¹ letter to Thomas Nelson, August 20, 1778.

by Peter Marshall and David Manuel; "The Christian History of the American Revolution," By Verna M Hall, and "What Hath God Wrought" by Dr. William P. Grady, to cite just a few.

Suffice it to say that to the Americans of the Founding Period, God's providence was an ever present fixture of their lives -- kept there by frequent prayer.

Another question comes to mind: For whose benefit was this clause added? Parliament's? The King's? Their "Brittish (sic) brethren?" I think not. Neither the King nor the Parliament would care much one way or the other whether these "rebels" invoked the name of God in their action. I submit the clause was added instead with the American people in mind, to reassure them that the step their leaders were about to take would not fall outside the will of God, but lay wholly within it. This was the message Americans had heard from the pulpits of colonial America for the previous 15-20 years: they had a Christian duty to resist tyrannical government. And now that the fateful day had arrived, it would have been comforting for the people to see that their leaders were not so "puffed up" as to think they could pull off so momentous an act without divine partnership.

As President, George Washington would proclaim: "It is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favors."²

In 1816, First Chief Justice of the Supreme Court summed it nicely by writing: "Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers. National prosperity can neither be obtained nor preserved without the favor of Providence."³ (emphasis added)

Pledging their "lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor" certainly signaled the gravity of the situation, but these were finite resources pledged by finite men. By contrast, the signers were also asking the One who owned "the cattle on a thousand hills" to bring His *infinite* resources to bear.

So where is God's Providence today?

"I am the Lord, I change not."⁴ I think we can safely affirm that God's providential hand is as available today as it was in 1776. Yet, American society today, at least publically,

² Thanksgiving Proclamation, 1789.

³ October 12, 1816.

⁴ Malachi 3:6 KJV.

sees no need to ask for God's providential help. Under these circumstances, can we expect God to provide it? God promises in 2nd Chronicles 7:14⁵ to heal the land if His people will but humble themselves, pray, seek His face and turn from their wicked ways. And certainly many American Christians have responded to this admonition. But how many more of our 320 Million Americans must do so before God will act?

In Rev John Witherspoon's 1776 sermon: "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men," referenced earlier, he concludes: *"Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction. A good form of government may hold the rotten materials together for some time, but beyond a certain pitch, even the best constitution will be ineffectual, and slavery must ensue."*

America can move forward with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, or we can "roll the dice" and see what we can do on our own; the choice is ours.

At the end of the radio show on August 19th my two commentators and I discussed what topic to explore next; there are so many topics relevant to the problems America faces. We decided to take on the topic of "Progressivism" and its effects on America. What were the origins of progressive thought? Who were the great expositors of that thought? And what have been the effects? I hope you'll join us as we begin this new discussion on Friday, August 26th at 7-8am. We'd love to hear your view.

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⁵ "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."