



The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding

by Eric Nelson.

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The Federal Constitution of the United States gives significant powers to the executive branch, headed by the president. Since the 1950s, scholars have viewed the Constitution as “a new political science” or “a revolution in favor of government,”² claiming that, before the 1780s, virtually all Patriots championed the Whig theory of government and opposed the “executive privilege” that the Stuart monarchs had held in seventeenth-century England. Hence, the American Revolution constituted a Whig rebellion against the “wicked” monarchy up to the Declaration of Independence. The failures of the Articles of Confederation in the 1780s caused some Patriots to abandon the republican principles that the Revolutionaries had fought for, in favor of the Federalists’ argument in support of a strong executive branch.

In *The Royalist Revolution*, political scientist Eric Nelson³ (Harvard Univ.) challenges this interpretation. Many of the colonists who had overwhelmingly supported the Whig theory of government before the mid-1760s abandoned it thereafter. Patriot leaders like Benjamin Franklin and James Wilson now stressed that the colonies had been established as dependencies of the Stuart monarchs. They attacked the Parliament and appealed to King George III to veto its acts. Historians have seen this as a purely tactical maneuver, but Nelson contends that “a great many of [the Patriots] self-consciously and momentarily ceased to be Whigs” (7), seeing themselves as “the last Atlantic defenders of the Stuart monarchy” (31). They consequently developed an anti-Whig thesis that “sweeping prerogatives in a single chief magistrate were not only compatible with the liberties of citizens and subjects, but in fact necessary for the preservation of free states” (5). Nelson calls this shift “the Royalist Revolution.” Contrary to the modern understanding of “Royalism,” he writes, it does not mean a hereditary form of government. Early modern political theorists meant by monarch “any single magistrate who was entrusted with the executive power—and, a fortiori, any chief magistrate who was assigned prerogative powers to make a law or to govern subjects before the law” (8). In this sense, the Patriot position up to 1775–76 was intrinsically “Royalist.”

The book’s first two chapters shift back and forth between eighteenth-century America, seventeenth-century England, and the evolution of “the Royalist Revolution” in 1767–76. Chapter 3 concerns colonial leaders’ embrace of Whig theory after George III refused to aid them against the Parliament’s position, and their claim to have rebelled against all branches of the British government. After Thomas Paine’s attack on monarchy in *Common Sense* (1776), most came to see hereditary monarchy as inherently immoral.

1. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1969).

2. Max Edling, *A Revolution in Favor of Government: Origins of the U.S. Constitution and the Making of the American State* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2003).

3. His earlier work includes *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2004) and *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2010).

The Declaration of Independence seemed to erase all support for “Royalism,” but its main proponents, including John Adams, James Wilson, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton, never forsook their cause:

Despite the coming of independence and the abolition of the kingly office in America, those patriots who had most aggressively developed and propagated the neo-Stuart defense of prerogative power during the imperial crisis ... never changed their minds. In energetic defiance of Whig orthodoxy, they continued to argue for the next two decades that sweeping prerogatives in a single chief magistrate were not only compatible with the liberties of citizens and subjects, but in fact necessary for the preservation of free states. (5)

These arguments “began to bear fruit in the later 1770s and laid the foundation for a broad resurgence of Royalist constitutionalism in the 1780s” (5), culminating in the ratification of the Federal Constitution, which “we might say, upheld the spirit of ’75” (6).

One of the book’s many merits is its author’s expert tapping of primary sources to illumine the well-charted field of late eighteenth-century American political thought. For instance, Nelson clarifies the alteration in some Patriots’ views of Parliament and the Stuarts: in 1765, John Adams argued that early colonists had fled to America to escape “the execrable race of the Stuarts” (37); but, by the late 1760s, the Patriots’ political tracts and personal correspondence showed increasing support for the Stuarts’ cause. In 1768, Benjamin Rush gushed over his visit to the House of Lords, where he “felt as if [he] walked on sacred ground.” Historians have often cited Rush’s letter to illustrate the commitment of British Americans at the time to the English constitution and the monarchy. However, Nelson notes, a few lines later Rush remarks of his visit to the House of Commons that “I cannot say I felt as if I walked on ‘sacred ground’ here,” where the “infernal scheme for enslaving America was first broached” and the “usurping Commons first endeavored to rob the King of his supremacy over the colonies and divide it among themselves!” (37–38). The author adduces several similar items of primary source evidence.

In addition, Nelson offers a novel reading of Paine’s *Common Sense*, one of the era’s most thoroughly explicated texts, challenging the conventional wisdom about late eighteenth-century political radicalism in America. He concurs with recent studies⁴ that stress Paine’s influence on the rise of republican radicalism, but astutely observes that his attack on monarchy is consistent with an *anti-republican* view of government. While seventeenth-century republican theorists had regarded monarchy per se as acceptable and opposed any ruler holding executive prerogative, Paine insisted that the very institution of monarchy itself was immoral, but that executive privilege could be legitimate under certain conditions. Once Americans accepted this argument, they could conceive of a single executive that yet preserved the people’s liberties.

However, Nelson’s account of the debate over “Royalist Patriotism” from the 1780s onward ignores its historical context. Thus, in the book’s final chapter, he details the critiques of John Adams’s *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* (1787), which defended the legitimacy of limited monarchy and attacked the pro-republican argument of seventeenth-century theorist Marchamont Nedham (1620–78). Adams’s contemporaries William Maclay and John Taylor attacked his essay for betraying the Revolution’s republican principles. Maclay, an opponent of the proposed constitution, argued in 1789 that an office of the presidency would be tantamount to monarchy. But Nelson dismisses his claim “that Adams’s ‘party’ greedily sought the spoils of office and wished to be adored as

4. E.g., Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2011), and Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine’s America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: U Virginia Pr, 2011).

idols ‘in the temple of royalty’ [as] both ad hominem and uninteresting” (230). Taylor criticized Adams’s argument in 1814 for its incongruity with the republican ideal of popular representation. Nelson sides firmly with Adams, who “understood something crucial about the debate over representation that Taylor did not” and sees Nedham’s republican theory as consistent with the Loyalist arguments in the 1770s (70).

Nelson here fails to grasp the meaning of the term “monarchy” in contemporary imagination, turning Adams and his opponents into political theorists rather than historical actors. Maclay and Taylor condemned Adams’s argument because they believed it imperiled the implementation, *in reality*, of the Revolution’s principles. Nelson maintains that Adams and other “Royalist Patriots” hoped to promote the presidency as a revered institution (231). Hence, even if Maclay’s accusation of corruption was baseless, his fear of idolatry was justified.

Taylor’s critique of Adams, in Nelson’s account, appears to have emerged out of thin air. Taylor was a leading proponent of Jeffersonian democracy and states’ rights in the early nineteenth century. In 1814, the United States was engaged in a war with Great Britain opposed by Adams’s Federalist Party leaders. Many of Jefferson’s supporters regarded this as treachery against national unity. Most historians now place Taylor’s attack on Adams in that context.⁵ Nelson seems unaware of their work.⁶ He assumes Adams and Taylor were intensely (and equally) engaged in the disputes over representation in seventeenth-century England. But, in 1814, debates between Marchamont Nedham and Thomas Hobbes might well have been the furthest thing from their minds.

Despite these criticisms, *The Royalist Revolution* is a valuable study of the Founding era’s political thought. In particular, Nelson forcefully rebuts the common claim that the Constitution “embodied a fundamental repudiation of the principles of the American Revolution.... [I]t would be highly misleading to talk about *the* principles of the American Revolution in the first place” (184). The current scholarly literature appropriately emphasizes the cultural and social diversities among the Patriots, but has settled for a surprisingly monolithic conception of the Revolution’s theoretical justifications. For that reason alone, Eric Nelson’s new corrective analysis is both salutary and long overdue.

5. See, e.g., James McLellan’s historical preface to Taylor’s essay and Peter Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: U Virginia Pr, 2000).

6. He cites only Taylor’s 1814 essay and discussions of it in the half-century-old works by Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 1967), and Gordon S. Wood (note 1 above), neither of which situates Taylor’s remarks in their historical context.