

with Great Britain, by whom but yesterday we were emancipated from slavery and death... We venerate the constitution, which with all its imperfections (too often exaggerated) we apprehend almost approaches as near to perfection as human kind can bear...

His scheme of independency would soon, very soon give way to a government imposed on us, by some Cromwell of our armies... A failure of commerce [would] preclude the numerous tribe of planters, farmers and others, from paying their debts... A war will ensure between the creditors and their debtors, which will eventually end in a general abolition of debts...

Volumes were insufficient to describe the horror, misery and desolation, awaiting the people at large in the form of American independence. In short, I affirm that it would be most excellent policy in those who wish for True Liberty to submit by an advantageous reconciliation to the authority of Great Britain... Independence and Slavery are synonymous terms.

Questions

1. Why does Chalmers equate independence with slavery?
2. Which Americans would most likely be persuaded by Chalmers's arguments?

CHAPTER 6

The Revolution Within

32. Exchange between Jewish Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, and George Washington, on Religious Toleration (1790)

Source: Philander D. Chase et al., eds., The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series (Charlottesville, 1996-), vol. 6, 284-86.

As remarkable as the expansion of political freedom was the Revolution's impact on American religion. During the Revolution, many Americans came to see religious toleration as an essential element of freedom. Throughout the new nation, states disestablished their established churches, that is, deprived them of public funding and special legal privileges. Catholics and Jews gained the rights to worship without persecution and to hold public office. The Bill of Rights, a series of constitutional amendments introduced by James Madison in 1789 and ratified in 1791, prohibited Congress from creating "an establishment of religion."

When George Washington, the first president, visited Newport, Rhode Island in 1790, the city's small Jewish community presented him with an address celebrating the establishment of a government that guaranteed "liberty of conscience" to all. Washington's reply made the important distinction between religious "toleration"—something granted by a dominant group to others—and genuine religious liberty, a recognition that all should enjoy the same "natural rights."

SIR,

Permit the children of the Stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person & merits and to join with our fellow Citizens in welcoming you to Newport.

With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, & danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword, shielded your head in the day of battle. . . .

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental Machine: This so ample and extensive Federal Union whose basis is Philanthropy, Mutual Confidence and Public Virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth in the Armies Of Heaven and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatever seemeth him good.

For all the Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the . . . great preserver of Men—beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life: and, when like Joshua full of days and full of honor, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.

Done and Signed by Order of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport
Rhode Island
Moses Seixas, Warden

Gentlemen.

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

George Washington

Questions

1. How do the Hebrew Congregation and President Washington differ in whom they credit for the success of the American Revolution?
2. Why does Washington distinguish between religious "toleration" and "liberty of conscience"?

33. The Right of "Free Suffrage" (1776)

Source: Letter by "Watchman," Maryland Gazette (Annapolis), August 15, 1776.

Among the dramatic changes in American life inspired by the War of Independence was the expansion of the right to vote. As ordinary Americans engaged in public debates, enlisted in state militias, and took part in legal and extralegal committees that enforced the orders of Congress, they demanded an end to property qualifications for voting.

The essay that follows, which appeared in a Maryland newspaper in 1776, illustrates the democratic upsurge that accompanied independence. The writer challenged the decision of the colony's leaders to restrict voting to those with property. The essay also shows how equality—"an equal claim to all the privileges, liberties, and immunities" of citizens, including the right to vote—had become linked to many Americans' understanding of freedom. By the 1780s, with the exceptions of Virginia, Maryland, and New York, a large majority of the adult white male population could meet voting requirements.

WHEN DESPOTISM REARED her head, and regal power was straining every nerve to ruin and enslave this country, opposition became expedient, opposition became absolutely necessary. The old government, ever treacherous and oppressive, could not be trusted, [and] the mode of government by convention was therefore instituted. But such mode of government proving extremely imperfect, attended with

many inconveniences, and not competent to the exigencies of affairs, and the honorable Congress having recommended that a government be formed, in each colony, under the "authority of the people," of such colony only. . . . the last convention resolved, that a convention be elected for the express purpose of forming a new government, by the authority of the people only, and enacting and ordering all things for the preservation, safety, and general weal of this colony.

Unfortunately, in the same sitting, they passed a resolve restricting the right of voting, thereby excluding nearly half of the members of this state [from] the enjoyment of their inherent right of free suffrage. . . . Is it not an insult to common sense to say that a government can be formed by the authority of the people only, when near half of them are excluded from any share in the election of the convention which is to form the government? This inequality of representation, contained in the resolve, cannot be justified on any principle. Every freeman must stand amazed at it. It struck at the grandest right of a freeman. . . . The ultimate end of all freedom is the enjoyment of a free suffrage. A constitution formed without this important right of free voting being preserved to the people, would be despotic. . . . For a people governed contrary to their inclination, or by persons to whom they have given no commission for that purpose, are, in the properest sense of the phrase, an *enslaved people*, if ever there was an enslaved people. That a *part* of the people should engross the power of electing legislators for the *whole* community is the grossest injustice that can be imagined. . . .

. . .

Every poor man has a life, a personal liberty, and a right to his earnings, and is in danger of being injured by government in a variety of ways; therefore it is necessary that these people should enjoy the right of voting for representatives, to be protectors of their lives, personal liberty, and their little property which, though small, is yet, upon the whole, a very great object to them. It would be unjust and oppressive in the extreme to shut out the poor in having a share in declaring who shall be the lawmakers of their country, and yet bear a very heavy share in the support of government. Would not the rich com-

plain grievously if they had no power of electing representatives? . . . Every member of this state, who lends his aid to the support of it, has an equal claim to all the privileges, liberties, and immunities with every [one] of his fellow countrymen; circumstances which are essential to the existence of a free state, and inseparable from the exercise and operation of a free people. . . . No power in the state can legally diminish this *equal right*, either by reducing the number of those privileges to which the whole community is justly entitled, or by imparting to men, or particular societies of men, such degrees of power and privilege that shall, in fact, render the other members less free or more subservient to the purposes of others, than the equal right of freedom can allow. If these be not the innate rights and privileges of the people, they are *not* free. . . .

Let, therefore, all hateful distinctions cease, and elections [be] made open and by the free suffrage of the people stand good and valid. . . . And let a government be established, where equal liberty can be enjoyed, the interest of the people promoted, and the cause of America maintained.

Questions

1. How does the writer define freedom and slavery?
2. What are his arguments for allowing men without property to vote?

34. Noah Webster on Equality (1787)

Source: Noah Webster, An Examination into the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution (Philadelphia, 1787), pp. 46–47.

Americans of the revolutionary generation were preoccupied with the social conditions of freedom. Could a republic survive with a sizable dependent class of citizens? In the excerpt that follows, from a pamphlet published in 1787, the educator and political writer Noah Webster identi-

fied equality as essential for the stability of republican government. Citing and amending the teachings of the French political theorist Montesquieu, Webster proclaimed, "A general and tolerably equal distribution of landed property is the whole basis of national freedom." "Equality," he added, was "the very soul of a republic."

To most free Americans, "equality" meant equal opportunity, rather than equality of condition. Many leaders of the Revolution nevertheless assumed that in the exceptional circumstances of the New World, with its vast areas of available land and large population of independent farmers and artisans, the natural workings of society would enable all free Americans to acquire land and achieve, if not complete equality, at least the economic independence necessary for political "virtue."

IN AMERICA, WE begin our empire with more popular privileges than the Romans ever enjoyed. We have not to struggle against a monarch or an aristocracy—power is lodged in the mass of the people.

On reviewing the English history, we observe a progress similar to that in Rome—an incessant struggle for liberty from the date of Magna Charta, in John's reign, to the revolution. The struggle has been successful, by abridging the enormous power of the nobility. But we observe that the power of the people has increased in an exact proportion to their acquisitions of property. Wherever the right of primogeniture is established, property must accumulate and remain in families. Thus the landed property in England will never be sufficiently distributed, to give the powers of government wholly into the hands of the people. But to assist the struggle for liberty, commerce has interposed, and in conjunction with manufacturers, thrown a vast weight of property into the democratic scale. Wherever we cast our eyes, we see this truth, that *property* is the basis of *power*; and this, being established as a cardinal point, directs us to the means of preserving our freedom. Make laws, irrevocable laws in every state, destroying and barring entailments; leave real estates to revolve from hand to hand, as time and accident may direct; and no family influence can be acquired and established for a series of

generations—no man can obtain dominion over a large territory—the laborious and saving, who are generally the best citizens, will possess each his share of property and power, and thus the balance of wealth and power will continue where it is, in the *body of the people*.

A general and tolerably equal distribution of landed property is the whole basis of national freedom: The system of the great Montesquieu will ever be erroneous, till the words *property or lands in fee simple* are substituted for *virtue*, throughout his *Spirit of Laws*.

Virtue, patriotism, or love of country, never was and never will be, till mens' natures are changed, a fixed, permanent principle and support of government. But in an agricultural country, a general possession of land in fee simple, may be rendered perpetual, and the inequalities introduced by commerce, are too fluctuating to endanger government. An equality of property, with a necessity of alienation, constantly operating to destroy combinations of powerful families, is the very *soul of a republic*—While this continues, the people will inevitably possess both *power and freedom*; when this is lost, power departs, liberty expires, and a commonwealth will inevitably assume some other form.

The liberty of the press, trial by jury, the Habeas Corpus writ, even Magna Charta itself, although justly deemed the palladia of freedom, are all inferior considerations, when compared with a general distribution of real property among every class of people. The power of entailing estates is more dangerous to liberty and republican government, than all the constitutions that can be written on paper, or even than a standing army. Let the people have property, and they *will* have power—a power that will for ever be exerted to prevent a restriction of the press, and abolition of trial by jury, or the abridgement of any other privilege. The liberties of America, therefore, and her forms of government, stand on the broadest basis. Removed from the fears of a foreign invasion and conquest, they are not exposed to the convulsions that shake other governments; and the principles of freedom are so general and energetic, as to exclude the possibility of a change in our republican constitutions.

Questions

1. Why does Webster consider an equal distribution of landed property more important to freedom than liberty of the press, trial by jury, and other rights?
2. Why does Webster believe the republican institutions of the United States will survive indefinitely?

35. Liberating Indentured Servants (1784)

Source: New York Independent Journal, January 24, 1784.

The upsurge of demands for equality during the Revolution brought into question many forms of inequality. In 1784, a group of "respectable" New Yorkers proposed to "liberate" a newly arrived shipload of indentured servants on the grounds that their status was "contrary to . . . the idea of liberty this country has so happily established." The incident was one small contribution to the rapid decline of indentured servitude, which by 1800 had all but disappeared from the United States. This development sharpened the distinction between freedom and slavery, and between a northern economy relying on what would come to be called "free labor" (that is, working for wages or owning a farm or shop) and a South ever more heavily dependent on the labor of slaves.

WHEREAS THE TRAFFIC of *White people*, heretofore countenanced by this State while under the arbitrary control of the British Government, is contrary to the feelings of a number of respectable Citizens, and to the idea of *liberty* this country has so happily established.

And whereas it is necessary to encourage emigration to this country, upon the most liberal plan, and for that purpose, a number of Citizens of this State, have proposed to *liberate* a cargo of Servants

just arrived, by paying their passage, and repaying themselves by a small rateable deduction out of the wages of such Servants, Such of the Citizens of this State as wish to encourage so laudable an undertaking, and if necessary, to petition the Legislature for a completion of their humane intentions, are requested to meet at the Hyderally Tavern, the lower end of King Street, *this Evening*, at Six of the Clock.

Questions

1. What practical reason does the notice give for eliminating indentured servitude?
2. Why do you think the notice singles out the sale of "White people" as contrary to liberty?

36. Petition of Slaves to the Massachusetts Legislature (1777)

Source: Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Series 5, Vol. 3 (1877), pp. 434-37.

The revolutionary generation's emphasis on liberty inevitably raised questions about the future of slavery in the new republic. The first concrete steps toward emancipation were "freedom petitions"—arguments for liberty presented to New England's courts and legislatures in the 1770s by enslaved African-Americans. As the petition that follows indicates, the slaves used the language of the Declaration of Independence—unalienable rights, the laws of nature, etc.—in the cause of abolition. Many slaves did gain their freedom during the era of the Revolution. The northern states enacted laws modeled on the one proposed by these petitioners (freeing the children of slaves after they reached adulthood). Far more slaves became free by running away to British lines. But the stark fact is that slavery survived the Revolution and, because of the natural increase of the

slave population, continued to grow. The first national census, in 1790, revealed that despite all those who had become free through state laws, voluntary emancipation, and escape, the number of slaves in the United States was 700,000—200,000 more than in 1776.

TO THE HONORABLE Council and House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court assembled, January 13, 1777

The petition of a great number of blacks detained in a state of slavery in the bowels of a free and Christian country. . . . Your petitioners apprehend that they have in common with all other men a natural and unalienable right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe has bestowed equally on all mankind and which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement whatever, but . . . were unjustly dragged by the hand of cruel power from their dearest friends and some of them even torn from the embraces of their tender parents, from a populous, pleasant, and plentiful country and in violation of laws of nature and of nations and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity brought here either to be sold like beasts of burden and like them condemned to slavery for life, among a people professing the mild religion of Jesus, a people not insensible of the secrets of rational being nor without spirit to resent the unjust endeavors of others to reduce them to a state of bondage and subjection. Your honors need not to be informed that a life of slavery like that of your petitioners, deprived of every social privilege, of everything requisite to render life tolerable is far worse than non-existence.

In imitation of the laudable example of the good people of these states your petitioners have long and patiently waited the event of petition after petition by them presented to the legislative body of this state. . . . They cannot but express their astonishment that it has never been considered that every principle from which America has acted in the course of their unhappy difficulties with Great Britain pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your

petitioners. They therefore humbly beseech your honors to give this petition its due weight and consideration and cause an act of the legislature to be passed whereby they may be restored to the enjoyments of that which is the natural right of all men—and their children who were born in this land of liberty may not be held as slaves after they arrive at the age of twenty-one years. So may the inhabitants of this state no longer [be] chargeable with the inconsistency of acting themselves the part which they condemn and oppose in others....

Questions

1. What, specifically, do the petitioners mean when they say that “every principle” Americans have invoked against Britain offers an argument in their favor?
2. How do the slaves use the language of the white revolutionaries to argue for an end to slavery?

37. Benjamin Rush, Thoughts Upon Female Education (1787)

Source: The Universal Asylum and The Columbian Magazine, April, 1790, pp. 209–13, May, 1790, 288–92.

A leader of the struggle for independence in Pennsylvania and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush was also a physician and a leading reformer, an advocate of the abolition of slavery and capital punishment and a proponent of public education. In 1787, in a speech to the Board of Visitors of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia, Rush explained why conditions of life in the United States and the republican form of government established by the Revolution made it imperative to extend educational opportunities to American women. Rush was hardly a

believer in full equality for women. Their political role, he believed, was to train their sons in “the principles of liberty” so that they could act as virtuous citizens. But he also noted that many economic opportunities were open to American women that did not exist in Europe and that to take advantage of them, women needed greater access to education than they had enjoyed in the past. Rush’s lecture illustrates how the struggle for independence threw into question many long-standing assumptions about how society should be organized.

THE EDUCATION OF young ladies, in this country, should be conducted upon principles very different from what it is in Great Britain, and in some respects different from what it was when we were part of a monarchical empire.

There are several circumstances in the situation, employments, and duties of women, in America, which require a peculiar mode of education.

I. The early marriages of our women, by contracting the time allowed for education, render it necessary to contract its plan, and to confine it chiefly to the more useful branches of literature.

II. The state of property, in America, renders it necessary for the greatest part of our citizens to employ themselves, in different occupations, for the advancement of their fortunes. This cannot be done without the assistance of the female members of the community. They must be the stewards, and guardians of their husbands’ property. That education, therefore, will be most proper for our women, which teaches them to discharge the duties of those offices with the most success and reputation.

III. ... A principal share of the instruction of children naturally devolves upon the women. It becomes us therefore to prepare them by a suitable education, for the discharge of this most important duty of mothers.

IV. The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty, and the possible share he may have in the government, of our country, make

it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government. . . .

The branches of literature most essential for a young lady, in this country, appear to be,

I. A knowledge of the English language. She should not only read, but speak and spell it correctly. The usual mode of teaching English syntax by means of rules committed to memory, appears to be as absurd as to teach a child to walk, by instructing it in the names and powers of the muscles which move the lower extremities. . . . Familiar conversations are alone proper for this purpose. . . .

II. Pleasure and interest conspire to make the writing of a fair and legible hand, a necessary branch of female education. . . .

III. Some knowledge of figures and book-keeping is absolutely necessary to qualify a young lady for the duties which await her in this country. . . .

IV. An acquaintance with geography and some instruction in chronology will enable a young lady to read history, biography, and travels, with advantage; and thereby qualify her not only for a general intercourse with the world, but, to be an agreeable companion for a sensible man. To these branches of knowledge may be added, in some instances, a general acquaintance with the . . . principles of chemistry, and natural philosophy, particularly with such parts of them as are applicable to domestic and culinary purposes.

V. Vocal music should never be neglected, in the education of a young lady, in this country. Besides preparing her to join in that part of public worship which consists in psalmody, it will enable her to soothe the cares of domestic life.

VI. Dancing is by no means an improper branch of education for an American lady. It promotes health renders the figure and motions of the body easy and agreeable. I anticipate the time when the resources of conversation shall be so far multiplied, that the amusement of dancing shall be wholly confined to children. But in our present state of society and knowledge, I conceive it to be an agreeable

substitute for the ignoble pleasures of drinking, and gaming, in our assemblies of grown people.

VII. The attention of our young ladies should be directed, as soon as they are prepared for it, to the reading of history-travels-poetry and moral essays . . . they subdue that passion for reading novels, which so generally prevails among the fair sex. . . . They (novels) hold up life, it is true, but it is not as yet life, in America. Our passions have not as yet 'overstepped the modesty of nature.' . . .

Let, therefore, all the branches of education which have been mentioned be connected with regular instruction in the Christian religion. . . . The female breast is the natural soil of Christianity. . . .

Questions

1. What role does Rush foresee for women in the new American republic?
2. What benefits does he anticipate for society and the family from extending educational opportunities to women?