

Nathaniel Bacon: Bacon's Manifesto (1676)

Later colonists in Virginia echoed earlier complaints as they struggled with the hardships of settlement. They also started to grumble about how some colonists who had managed to establish themselves earlier were limiting the opportunities of others by amassing the best lands and controlling the government. By the 1670s most new immigrants and servants just freed from their indentures found that they could not afford lands in the settled areas, so they had to push on to the frontier. As they pushed out, the Native Americans pushed back. These issues led to a split between the colonists: those who supported Governor William Berkeley's Indian policies and defended his administration against those who favored Nathaniel Bacon's ideas. Bacon's Rebellion (1676), which was ultimately a battle over who was to rule the settlement, showed that Indian actions could pose not only external threats, but also internal ones. In the latter case, their actions produced violent schisms within settler communities. Bacon was a recent immigrant to Virginia and a young man still in his twenties when he challenged Governor Berkeley's authority. Representing the small farmers of the frontier who had been battling the natives, Bacon called for the extermination of the Indians so as to secure the territory. When Berkeley appeared to be more interested in subduing the frontiersmen, Bacon and his supporters marched against the government in Jamestown to force the issue. Having been declared a rebel, pardoned, and then condemned again, Bacon rebutted the charges against him and other rebels in a public declaration that outlined their motivation and purpose.

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... [I]f there bee as sure there is, a just God to appeal too, if Religion and Justice be a sanctuary here, If to plead the cause of the oppressed, If sincerely to aime at his Majesties Honour and the Publick good without any reservation or by Interest, If to stand in the Gap after soe much blood of our dear Brethren bought and sold, If after the losse of a great part of his Majesties Colony deserted and dispeopled, freely with our lives and estates to in-deavor to save the remaynders bee Treason God Almighty Judge and lett guilty dye, But since wee cannot in our hearts find one single spott of Rebellion or Treason or that wee have in any manner aimed at subverting the settled Government or attempting of the Person of any either magistrate or private man not with standing the severall Reproaches and Threats of some who for sinister ends were disaffected to us and censured our ino[cent]' and honest designes, and since all people in all places where wee have yet bin can attest our civill quiet peaseable behaviour farre different from that of Rebellion and tumultuous persons let Trueth be bold and all the world know the real Foundations of pretended guilt, Wee appeale to the Country itselve what and of what nature their Oppressions have bin or by what Caball and mystery the designes of many of those whom wee call great men have bin transacted and caryed on, but let us trace these men in Authority and Favour to whose hands the

dispensation of the Countries wealth has been committed; let us observe the sudden Rise of their Estates composed with the Quality in which they first entered this Country Or the Reputation they have held here amongst wise and discerning men, And lett us see wither their extractions and Education have not bin vile, And by what pretence of learning and vertue they could soe soon into Employments of so great Trust and consequence, let us consider their sudden advancement and let us also consider wither any Pub-lick work for our safety and defence or for the Advancement and propogation of Trade, liberall Arts or sciences is here Extant in any [way] adauate to our vast chardg, now let us compare these things togit[her] and see what sponges have suckt up the Publique Treasure and wither it hath not bin privately contrived away by unworthy Favourites and juggling Parasites whose tottering Fortunes have bin repaired and supported at the Publique chardg, now if it be so Judg what greater giult can bee then to offer to pry into these and to unriddle the misterious wiles of a powerfull Cabal let all people Judge what can be of more dangerous Import then to suspect the soe long Safe proceedings of Some of our Grandees and wither People may with safety open their Eyes in soe nice a Concerne.

Another main article of our Giult is our open and manifest aversion of all, not onely the Foreign but the

protected and Darling Indians, this we are informed is Rebellion of a deep dye For that both the Governour and Councill are by Colonell Coales Assertion bound to defend the Queen and Appamatocks with their blood Now whereas we doe declare and can prove that they have bin for these Many years enemies to the King and Country, Robbers and Theeves and Invaders of his Majesties' Right and our Interest and Estates, but yet have by persons in Authority bin defended and protected even against His Majesties loyall Subjects and that in soe high a nature that even the Complaints and oaths of his Majesties Most loyall Subjects in a lawfull Manner proffered by them against those barborous Outlawes have bin by the right honourable Governour rejected and the Delinquents from his presence dismissed not only with pardon and indemnitye but with all incourage-ment and favour. . . .

Another main article of our Giult is our Design not only to ruine and extirpate all Indians in Generall but all Manner of Trade and Commerce with them, Judge who can be innocent that strike at this tender Eye of Interest; Since the Right honourable the Governour hath bin pleased by his Commission to warrant this trade who dare oppose it, or opposing it can be innocent, Although Plantations be deserted, the blood of our dear Brethren Split...

Another Article of our Giult is To Assert all those neighbour Indians as well as others to be outlawed, wholly unqualified for the benefitt and Protection of the law, For that the law does reciprocally protect and punish, and that all people offending must either in

person or Estate make equivalent satisfaction or Restitution according to the manner and merit of the Offences Debts or Trespasses; Now since the Indians cannot according to the tenure and forme of any law to us known be prosecuted, Seised or Complained against, Their Persons being difficulty distinguished or known, Their many nations languages, and their subterfuges such as makes them incapeable to make us Restitution or satisfaction would it not be very giulty to say They have bin unjustly defended and protected these many years.

If it should be said that the very foundation of all these disasters the Grant of the Beaver trade to the Right Honourable Governour was illegall and not granteable by any power here present as being a monopoly, were not this to deserve the name of Rebell and Traytor.

Judge therefore all wise and unprejudiced men who may or can faithfully or truely with an honest heart attempt the country's good, their vindication and libertie without the aspersion of Traitor and Rebell, since as soe doing they must of necessity gall such tender and dear concernes, But to manifest Sincerity and loyalty to the World, and how much wee abhorre those bitter names, may all the world know that we doe unanimously desire to represent our sad and heavy grievances to his most sacred Majesty as our Refuge and Sanctuary, where wee doe well know that all our Causes will be impartially heard and Equall Justice administred to all men.

Review Questions

1. Whom did Bacon think should judge whether he and his followers had engaged in rebellion and treason?
2. Whom did he believe should bear the guilt for the colony's problems? Why?
3. How did he argue that the protection of the Indians under the law is unjust? Was it a valid argument? Why or why not?