



Bacon's Rebellion and Respect

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Sir William Berkeley was the royal governor of the English colony of Virginia from 1641 to 1652. During the time of the English Civil War, Parliamentary forces sailed to Virginia to depose Governor Berkeley because he supported the Royalist forces. He was out of power during the reign of Oliver Cromwell and restored to the governorship in 1660 when Charles II was restored to the throne. Governor Berkeley and the Virginia government instituted some unpopular policies such as revoking universal male suffrage and instituting property requirements to vote, giving land grants to fellow wealthy politicians, and preventing the colonists from moving onto Native American lands because of fear of conflict.

In September 1675, a trade dispute between some colonists and Doeg Native Americans near the Potomac River led to several deaths. Tensions escalated, and in the months that followed, colonial militia numbering in the hundreds engaged in several indiscriminate slaughters of hostile and friendly natives. In retaliation, Native Americans launched several raids along the frontier and killed dozens. Berkeley tried to maintain order but failed, especially since his policies caused an uprising led by Nathaniel Bacon.

Bacon was a wealthy planter but sided with the common people against the governor in order to win greater respect for their rights. Virginians (along with other colonists) were developing a strong American identity and an autonomous, individualist spirit of liberty. They would no longer suffer government abuse of their rights.

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In the late winter of 1674, a young Englishman named Nathaniel Bacon boarded a ship bound for Virginia in the American colonies. It was a treacherous voyage that lasted months during which time storms pounded the ship and made the passengers seasick. The wealthy young gentleman in his twenties had a fortune of some 1,800 English pounds. He was a smart man, having attended Cambridge University. When he finally landed in Virginia, his contacts, including the governor's wife, helped him establish himself. He purchased 1,200 acres of property on which he built a plantation near present-day Richmond, and was also seated on the Governor's Council. Bacon was part of the planter elite and an unlikely leader of a rebellion.

After several months in Virginia, Bacon was disturbed by what he discovered about the administration of Governor William Berkeley. Berkeley had been governor for a period of more than twenty years with only a short interregnum, and the common people of Virginia thought that his lengthy tenure was corrupting him and his administration. Ordinary farmers were suffering because the value of their tobacco exports was declining rapidly, but their tax

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payments were increasing. The landless also lost the right to vote when property requirements were added as a voting requirement. Governor Berkeley also doled out generous land grants to his political supporters. Finally, farmers wanted to expand onto new lands, but Berkeley feared conflict with the Native American tribes. Berkeley also seemed negligent of his duties to protect the colonists who lived on the frontier, doing nothing when natives launched raids of reprisal for the deaths they suffered at the hands of white militias in the fall of 1675.

Bacon wanted respect for the rights of the common people of Virginia and decided to take matters into his own hands. He raised an army and marched to the frontier by Virginia and North Carolina, where he killed several natives. On May 3, 1676, Berkeley sought to stop him and ordered an army of 300 militia to march against Bacon. The people were upset that the governor appeared to be leaving the frontier open to attack, especially during a time when wars with Native Americans were raging in the northern colonies. Moreover, a planned series of forts that would significantly raise taxes aroused popular ire, especially during the drought and poor economic conditions that occurred that year. Berkeley had a negative view of ordinary Virginians, believing them to be no more than a “poor, indebted, discontented, and armed” mob. Declaring Bacon to be a rebel, he ordered new elections. The people, however, loved Nathaniel Bacon and voted him a seat in the Virginia Assembly.

When the Assembly convened on June 5, Bacon sailed to Jamestown with fifty armed followers to protect him from the governor. On June 7, Berkeley ordered Bacon arrested and locked up. Berkeley had Bacon brought forward in chains and announced, “Now I behold the greatest rebel that ever was in Virginia.” A few days later, Bacon signed a written confession, was brought before the governor, and knelt down before him. Berkeley repeated the words, “God forgive you, I forgive you,” three times, pardoned Bacon, and actually restored him to a seat on his council. The governor promised Bacon a commission to fight the Native Americans but failed to deliver it.

Bacon slipped out of the capital and gathered more than 600 men. On June 23, they marched on Jamestown and threatened the governor and legislators with violence if Bacon did not receive a commission to defend the frontier. They chanted, “We will have it! We will have it!” while Bacon personally confronted Berkeley and screamed, “I came for a commission, and a commission I will have before I go!” Berkeley dramatically offered his breast to Bacon to fire upon, stating, “Here! Shoot me, before God, fair mark, shoot.” Bacon could not bring himself to murder the man and allowed him to leave.

With news of more massacres on the frontier, Bacon led his army to confront the Native American warriors, plunging back into the wilderness. While he was away, Berkeley tried to raise a militia to fight the natives, but many suspected the governor wanted them to march against fellow Virginians and therefore refused to join. A month later, on July 29, 1676, Bacon marched his army back to Williamsburg and caused the governor to flee to the Eastern Shore.

Bacon called on white servants and black slaves to join his army in rebellion against the corrupt governor and his wealthy supporters. On September 13, Bacon's army surrounded the capital of Jamestown and laid a siege to it in the late summer's humidity. They dug trenches, encamped in the mud, and fought off lice and mosquitoes while living off provisions from

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nearby plantations. Berkeley's defending army sallied out of the fort to break the siege, but their attack failed miserably and the morale of his forces collapsed. On September 19, the governor watched helplessly from his ship on the James River as the rebel army proceeded to burn the capital to the ground.

A little more than a month later, Bacon died from typhus and dysentery due to the filthy conditions, and his rebellion largely collapsed. The governor pardoned most of the participants but hanged a few of the ringleaders. By this time, Charles II had had enough of the disorder in Virginia. A British force of nearly 1,100 soldiers was dispatched to the colony to restore order, arriving in mid-February. Moreover, Charles sought to pacify Virginians by removing the cause of their disturbances, ordering Berkeley to return home. The new government patrolled the frontier with greater vigor and calmed tensions with Native Americans. It also lowered taxes and opened up additional lands for settlement to satisfy popular wishes.

Nathaniel Bacon respected the rights of his fellow Virginians and fought to ensure that those rights were respected. He is remembered for leading a valiant rebellion of fiercely independent colonists in Virginia who refused to live under a corrupt government.