TYRANNY UNMASKED

John Taylor
Edited by F. Thornton Miller

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FOREWORD

When John Taylor supported James Monroe’s campaigns for president, he informed the candidate that upon taking office he would find his old friend in the opposition. Taylor stated that he intended to live and die a “minority man.” He made the frequent inquiring into the measures of government his life’s work. To fulfill this task, he wrote *Tyranny Unmasked*. He and other Old Republicans believed that, without their vigilant watch over the federal government on behalf of the people, individual liberty would be sacrificed.¹

John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia, was born in 1753. Orphaned as a young boy, he was adopted by his maternal uncle Edmund Pendleton. One of Virginia’s most distinguished citizens, Pendleton served from the Revolution to his death in 1803 as head of the state’s highest court. Taylor studied at William and Mary and then read law in his uncle’s office. He served as an officer in the Continental army and the Virginia militia during the Revolution. After the war, he had a successful law practice. Following marriage to Lucy Penn, daughter of the signer John Penn of North Carolina, he retired from the law to spend the remainder of his life as a planter. His home was Hazlewood, on the Rappahannock River near Port Royal.

Taylor was an advocate of scientific farming. He wrote the agricultural treatise *Arator* and was the first president of the Virginia Agricultural Society. Like other members of the Virginia gentry, he fulfilled his public duty, serving in the state legislature (1779–81, 1783–85, and 1796–1800) and as a representative of Virginia in the United States

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Senate (1793–94, 1803, and 1822–24). He was serving as a senator when he died on 21 August 1824.

Taylor was a leading espouser of Country, or agrarian, republicanism, which derived mainly from the writings of the eighteenth-century English Country opposition. Advocates of the ideology included Viscount Bolingbroke [Henry St. John], and Cato [John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon]. This perspective originated in a provincial outlook toward London and the central government and in a belief that there was a division between the simple, virtuous farmers in the country and the wealthy noble courtiers at the king's court. While the former looked to the best interests of the whole, the latter, corrupted by wealth and power, thought only of their self interests. The opposition believed this corruption violated the principles of the ancient English constitution, altered the checks and balances, and, unless opposed, would end English liberty.

The Country opposition rose against the corrupt Court and believed it had won with the glorious Revolution of 1688. But William III and the Whigs had their financial revolution, the English banking system was developed, and the national debt became an institution. A Court party was created and became established under the leadership of Robert Walpole. The opposition now added bankers and financial speculators to the list of those at Court who it believed wished to grow wealthy by robbing the country.2

By the time of the Revolution, many Americans were using the Court-Country paradigm to explain to themselves and the world what they feared and why they resisted the imperial government. From this perspective, the American revolutionaries waged a successful Country

opposition.⁵ In the 1780s, however, the republican Patriots divided. Now that the distant threat to their liberty was removed, some Americans, many of whom became Federalists, began devising plans to restructure and strengthen the republic. Anti-Federalists, Taylor among them, responded to the reform movement—and its main result, the Constitution—with the same distrust they had shown earlier toward London. They feared that a new central government (eventually in Washington, D.C.) would replace the old one, and that, again, there would be a concentration of power over which they would have little control.

Along with many Anti-Federalists, Taylor had wanted only a revision of the Articles of Confederation (basically wanting things to stay as they were). They wanted to keep a purely federal government wherein the states were sovereign, with power remaining at the state and local levels. After the Constitution was ratified, they hoped for a new convention, or for amendments that would undermine the power of the federal government.⁴ In the meanwhile, they advocated the strict construction of the Constitution in order to restrict the administration of the federal government as much as possible. They developed an interpretation that denied that the Constitution was a fundamental or supreme law of the land. This view would be further developed and amplified in Taylor’s writings, including *Tyranny Unmasked*.

During the 1790s, Taylor was among the many Anti-Federalists who joined with the Republican opposition of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson in its effort to drive Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists out of power. Drawing upon the Court-Country paradigm, the Republicans portrayed Hamilton as modeling his policies on Walpole’s and building the Federalists into a Court party in America. Taylor publicized the view of the new Country opposition to Hamil-


ton’s Court in his pamphlet *An Enquiry into the Principles and Tendency of Certain Public Measures.*

Although Taylor joined in Madison’s efforts during the 1790s to organize the Republican opposition to Hamilton, he and other agrarian Republicans did not simply wish to replace the Federalist administration. They opposed a strong national government and blamed the Constitution for allowing Hamilton’s success. Taylor wrote that “the public good, in the hands of two parties nearly poised as to numbers, must be extremely perilous.” The concomitant conflict between parties and interest groups would divide America and lead to disunion. Americans must return to those who represented the whole.

A concern for upholding state rights was at the heart of Taylor’s political thinking and runs through all of his writing, including *Tyranny Unmasked*. Taylor was an advocate of state rights, first, as an end in itself—in each state, Americans made up a single people and should be allowed to legislate for themselves in internal matters. The closer the exercise of power was to the citizen body at the local level, the more it could be trusted. Second, he believed state rights served as a means to watch and restrict the federal government, keeping it constrained and weak. A state could act as a buffer between its citizens and the federal government.

In Taylor’s view, states should function in the federal system like

5. Taylor, *An Enquiry into the Principles and Tendency of Certain Public Measures* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1794); Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978). Banning states that Taylor’s 1790s pamphlets established him as “the most interesting and important Republican publicist” at the time, provided historians with “the most important source for an understanding of Republican thought,” and they also “reveal more obviously than any other the Republicans’ debt to English opposition thought,” 192–3.


Parliament functioned in the British system, acting to protect itself, the people, and the constitution against Stuart kings. The British had not resisted their government, but had used one part of government, Parliament, to oppose another, the Crown. Parliament was the traditional institution where grievances could be heard, petitions could be made to the king, and resolutions of protest could be drafted. That was the role that the lower houses of the thirteen colonies performed. State righters drew upon this tradition of going through the states to counter the federal government.⁸

As an active politician, Taylor made his greatest contribution in the service of state rights: he presented the Virginia Resolutions of 1798 and led the Republicans in the Virginia legislature as they sought to rally the opposition to the Federalists. The Republicans charged that the Sedition Act violated the First Amendment by imposing a censorship on the press. Federalists responded that its purpose was not to prevent publication but to punish publications libeling the government. This was in the Anglo-American common law tradition and—the Federalists pointed out—the Sedition Act was an improvement since truth was made a defense. Republicans answered by denying that America had a federal common law. They held that the English common law had been brought to the colonies and then was modified by statute, first by the colonial, and then by the state, legislatures. There were, accordingly, as many common law systems in America as there were states.⁹

Taylor believed that the Federalists were using the Sedition Act to expand centralized power, which would subvert individual liberty. He

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warned that “one usurpation begat another.” 10 The states granted certain power to the federal government and, he argued, if the federal government acted unconstitutionally and tyrannically, the states and the people must act to check the concentration of power. He believed disunion was better than oppression. Taylor told his fellow Virginians that liberty was their country and they must be ready to protect it. 11 His later works, especially Tyranny Unmasked, were efforts to further identify the tyrant.

In the 1800 election, Taylor and other Republicans who had taken a Country opposition stand could hope that they had been victorious. Yet, although Jefferson spoke of reforming Federalist abuses and of reducing the size of the government, he also took a moderate course between the Federalists and the extreme wing of his own party. None of the acts establishing the Hamiltonian system was repealed. Taylor saw the refusal by the Jefferson and Madison administrations to advance the “revolution of 1800” as a betrayal. The Republican party continued to gain support, but Taylor believed republican principles had been abandoned. He wrote that an “adherence to men, is often disloyalty to principles.” Taylor and others who continued in the tradition of the Country republican ideology, now calling themselves the “Old Republicans,” believed that those who were attracted to power—“majority men” tended always to become corrupt and to abuse the trust and betray the best interests of the people. For this tendency, they had to be watched by “minority men.” 12

In 1820, after the Marshall Court’s opinions in Martin v. Hunter’s Lessee and McCulloch v. Maryland, Taylor attacked the Court’s broad construction of the Constitution in Construction Construed, and Constitutions Vindicated. He described two kinds of constitutional construction: one to maintain principled government and the other to corrupt


12. Taylor, A Pamphlet, quote from 12.
government. He believed the latter was used by those in power to extend that power and the founders never intended “this pernicious species of construction.” 13 He felt that the Supreme Court used a broad construction to assert its supremacy over Constitutional interpretation and over state courts. Because state and federal courts were separate, he felt state courts should also interpret the Constitution. Taylor wrote that constitutional uniformity was not necessary. Separate constitutional opinions would preserve liberty and keep “our system for dividing, limiting, and checking power.” 14

As he went on to explain in Tyranny Unmasked, the Constitution was of value only to keep the federal government operating in accord with what Taylor called the principles of 1776 or 1798. “We need only recollect that the intention and end of the constitution was to ‘secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.’ ” 15 For Taylor, the Constitution was of worth only if it could serve the more fundamental cause of liberty: “the real design of the constitution.” 16 The adherence to principle was what he meant by “constitutional.”

In Tyranny Unmasked and in his other political treatises, Taylor rejected the argument that the majority of the American nation could impose its will upon any minority in order to achieve what was asserted to be in the general welfare. Since Taylor believed there was no American people, only a union of states, majority rule in Congress was irrelevant where it did not have the authority to act. The Constitution gave the federal government certain specified powers and it could not move beyond them. More to the point, Taylor would not bow to majority rule when it compromised principles of government. He thought governmental acts in violation of principle, even if sanctioned by a construction of the Constitution, were tyrannical. If advocated by a majority in Congress, it was a tyranny of the majority.

Taylor opposed those who advocated the expansion of national power and demanded banks and tariffs. Earlier, these included Hamil-

14. Ibid., 144.
15. Taylor, Tyranny Unmasked, 100.
16. Ibid., 102.
ton and the Federalists and later, the politicians of the Era of Good Feelings and 1820s who eventually became Whigs. As Taylor saw it, they sought to bring the British system to America, along with its national debt, political corruption, and Court party—which Taylor called the new “monied aristocracy.”

Along with watching and trying to check nationalism and unlimited power, Taylor opposed the advocates of mercantilist economics. He best stated his perspective in 1818 in his grand agrarian treatise, Arator, in which he discussed a distinction between real and artificial wealth. Farmers could exist without government, and thus produced real wealth, but governments, new laws, and charters were needed to establish the professions of lawyers, judges, politicians, and bankers. These dependents produced artificial, or paper, wealth.

Taylor criticized financial gains realized at the expense of agriculture. Through taxation and tariffs, real landed wealth paid for the extravagance at Court. The Country grew poorer while the Court grew richer. For Taylor and the Old Republicans, independent farmers were fighting for liberty, opposing dependent, city-dwelling, immoral, and corrupt parasites who lived off the farmers’ hard work.  

Having begun his career as a polemicist in 1794 by denouncing Hamiltonianism, Taylor, by 1822, when he published Tyranny Unmasked, believed little had changed. There was still a group of Northerners determined to use the federal government to bring about its economic goals. Its means were national banks, internal improvements, and tariffs—the last of which was the specific issue addressed in Tyranny Unmasked.

Taylor argued that tariffs used to build industry would raise prices, which would hurt farmers. Although developing domestic industry initially would increase demand for domestic food production, Taylor believed that agriculture eventually would decline as a result. By restricting the flow of imports, tariffs would also hurt international trade.

Further, he believed that the difference between the natural price and the artificial price caused by the tariff amounted to a tax. And he considered the federal government’s taxing of agricultural regions in order to subsidize industry a violation of principle—and robbery.

Taylor has been portrayed as a pastoral, nostalgic dreamer, who fabricated a romantic, agrarian past that had never existed. He has been described as an idealist rather than a practical man, who, like other Anti-Federalists and Old Republicans, had never been in power and therefore, knew nothing of actually administering a government.18

Many of the Anti-Federalists and Old Republicans had known government first hand, though, having administered power at state and local levels. Drawn from the gentry in Southern states, their politics was influential in county courthouses and state legislatures. Their number included county justices of the peace, state legislators, governors, judges, and Congressmen—in Taylor’s Virginia, such men as William Branch Giles, Patrick Henry, James Monroe, Edmund Pendleton, and Spencer Roane. Their experience had taught them to believe that governments did not have to be large and powerful. They held that county governments were good examples, being so small and weak that they offered little inducement for or reward from corruption. In contrast, they thought the more distant and more powerful a government, the greater chance of corruption. As Taylor stated repeatedly in his works, he would not trust written constitutions and checks and balances to prevent corruption. Great power should never be granted in the first place.19

Taylor’s virtue was in the negative, in what he opposed. He devoted his life to protecting liberty and did not trust those who advocated the ideals of equality and freedom or who promised empire and prosperity. He took a strong stand against government expansion and corruption,

18. Most representative of this view is Robert E. Shalhope, John Taylor of Caroline: Pastoral Republican (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980).

but he was likewise hostile to attempts to reform society through the use of government, from extending the suffrage to the abolition of slavery. In his polemics, he questioned the kind of society and economy desired in the American republic. In *Tyranny Unmasked*, he attacked the economics of mercantilism, preferring to continue with either agrarian republicanism or classical capitalism. If the national government compromised the Constitution, subverted state rights, and sacrificed individual rights and the interests of whole portions of the population, he wondered whether the form of a republic was retained without the substance.

In *Tyranny Unmasked*, Taylor was attacking a 15 January 1821 report of the Congressional Committee of Manufactures calling for tariffs to help expand industry. He also used this critique of the proposed tariff to discuss other threats to the republic posed by the friends of the tariff, to show the “real design of the protection duty, and all other exclusive privileges.”

While *Tyranny Unmasked* is not divided into chapters, it does have three clear sections. In the first section, Taylor makes a general attack upon the protective tariff policy and its advocates; in the second section, analyzed under nine headings, he summarizes his arguments against tariffs; and, in the third section, he takes up a general discussion of tyranny.

In the first section, he looks at tariffs from several perspectives, using analogies, examples from history, points of analysis, and counter arguments to reveal the ulterior motives behind his opponents’ claims, which he portrays as sham and rhetoric. Taylor seeks to show that a coalition of political and economic interests used idealistic phrases such as the “general welfare” while intending to rob the country and extend its power and increase its wealth.

His style is polemical. His language, full of scorn and ridicule. He wished to counter politicians who said to their constituents: “We will gratify your avarice if you gratify our ambition.” He feared what would

result if the "tribes of patrons and clients" would "unite their talents."\textsuperscript{21} Taylor was greatly disturbed by the rhetorical mask used to cover the evils he saw being committed. His purpose was to reveal what was behind the mask: "Form is the shadow, but measures are the substance."\textsuperscript{22}

Taylor saw certain measures of government leading to tyranny. At the heart of democratic politics a political science is developing that would teach the arts of deceiving the public. These arts "constitute the science of modern civilized tyranny."\textsuperscript{23} Ideas such as "divine right" and "parliamentary supremacy" have been replaced by "general welfare" and "federal supremacy." Taylor writes that "tyranny is wonderfully ingenious in the art of inventing specious phrases to spread over its nefarious designs."\textsuperscript{24}

In the second section, Taylor looks at the tariff's major consequences. A protective tariff would violate the Constitution, restrict the economy rather than expand it, and reduce the federal government's customs duties revenue because it would decrease the volume of imports. Tariff wars hurt international commerce. America had prospered through two centuries of foreign trade, but protective tariffs would seriously damage that trade. Government assistance for industry would hurt merchants, craftsmen, household manufactures, and—worst of all, for Taylor—farmers. Only the manufacturing interests—the owners of the factories and their financial backers—would gain.

A note of explanation is needed for Taylor's use in *Tyranny Unmasked* of the term "capitalists" to describe his opponents. When he began writing in the 1790s, he was more likely to use the phrase "monied aristocracy" to describe his enemies. Thirty years later, he believed the Constitution, Hamilton, Federalists, and Republican party moderation and compromise had allowed an aristocracy of wealth to rise in America. In America, instead of titled nobles, the lords were

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 49, 71.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 78.
financiers. Instead of members of the House of Lords, they were the stockholders of the Bank of the United States. By the writing of *Tyranny Unmasked*, Taylor was using the more economic-sounding term, “capitalists,” to refer to these aristocrats. But, he was not opposed to capitalism, and he often cited Adam Smith and capitalist economists in his works, including this one. Like Adam Smith, Taylor opposed government intervention in the economy and wanted a natural economy, a free market system. Taylor opposed those capitalists who were not satisfied with natural economics and who sought to benefit through government intervention. He described his opponents more precisely when he used such phrases as “manufacturing capitalists” or “protective-duty capitalists.”

There was, however, a major aspect of capitalism that Taylor rejected. He would not condone the potential pluralism of the capitalist, liberal, or free market theory: an America consisting of competing interests. For Taylor, the only good interest was natural and productive, and, in America, where the vast majority were farmers, that was agriculture, which should remain predominant. He was an agrarian first and foremost; he was a capitalist as long as most capital was going into agriculture.\(^{25}\) He believed there were fundamental principles in economics just as in politics. “Among these principles,” he writes in *Tyranny Unmasked*, “the most important is, that land is the only, or at least the most permanent source of profit; and its successful cultivation the best encourager of all other occupations, and the best security for national prosperity.”\(^{26}\)

In the third section of *Tyranny Unmasked*, Taylor discusses tyranny, generally, and specifically the choice confronting Americans. What could preserve liberty? A balance of federal power could not do so, for the power of the parts combined could expand to overwhelming extent. The people as a whole could not serve as the main check because, despite the elections, politicians could still expand their power. And, certainly, the Supreme Court could not preserve liberty, for it was

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biased, being a party (as a part of the federal government) in any constitutional dispute between the federal and state governments. Assertive state rights were necessary to preserve liberty.

Taylor writes that Americans had to choose between federalism and a division of power or a consolidated national power; between small and weak government or large and powerful government; and between inexpensive government with low taxes or extravagant government with high taxes. Would America have a government that preserved the value of the labor of the productive members of society, he asks, or one that valued only the support of its “parasites and partisans”? Would the government preserve individual property or would it transfer property to a privileged aristocracy? Could a country have a clearer choice? Americans could pursue either of two kinds of politics and economics, one that maintained liberty and one that led to tyranny.

Taylor was more of a pamphleteer than a legislator, but, still, he represented constituents who supported state rights, local government, and the interests of the gentry. He matured while the American Patriots were taking their stand against the British and saw that pamphleteers helped rally Americans to the cause. He was a leading pamphleteer during the 1790s for the opposition that defeated the Federalists. He wrote his treatises against Federalists, nationalism, and the Marshall Court while Virginia renewed its interposition against the federal government. By 1820, he was at his height of popularity among his fellow Virginians and one of the chief architects of Virginia’s state sovereignty doctrine. Many Virginians would draw on his ideas as they defended state rights and countered nationalism. His ideas remained viable into the Jacksonian era and became part of the Southern state rights ideology. His critique of tariffs would be repeated by John C. Calhoun and the South Carolina nullifiers and by Southern Democrats to the Civil War.

The influence of Taylor’s ideas should not be undervalued because

they did not prevail in the end. As he wrote *Tyranny Unmasked*, he had good reason for hope. America did not have to use government subsidies to become industrialized. It is easily forgotten that another America existed prior to the Civil War. As Taylor had pointed out, America had had another choice. What Taylor feared was the America after 1860; the high protective tariffs, the vast industrial and urban expansion, and all the problems that confronted Americans during the late nineteenth century. He had alerted his constituency to the dangers he saw coming from industrialization and urbanization. Taylor had held up an alternative: America could have refused to become another Britain and, instead, have remained an agrarian republic.

Most of Taylor’s world is gone. But, with the continued increase of the power of the federal government and the pursuit of policies that benefit specific constituencies, the principles set out in *Tyranny Unmasked* are as relevant today as they were in 1822. Taylor admonished us to watch government, to inform the people when it encroached upon liberty and rights, and, like him, to be ready to unmask the tyrant for the public to see.

**A Note on the Text**

The text used for this edition is the first edition of *Tyranny Unmasked*, published in Washington in 1822 by Davis and Force. I have silently corrected the few typographical errors. The footnotes are mine. The typography has been modernized completely, while the spelling has been modernized only slightly.

**F. Thornton Miller**

*Southwest Missouri State University*
Selected Bibliography


