



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on May 21, 2024

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John Milton: Fearless Foe of Despots

In the pantheon of individuals whose ideas forged the ideological framework of the American Founding Fathers, English poet and polemicist John Milton holds a distinguished place. An erudite scholar, a poetic genius, and a fervent advocate for republicanism and freedom of speech, Milton's life and works resonated across the Atlantic, influencing the philosophical bedrock upon which the United States was built. His steadfast opposition to tyranny and his articulate defense of liberty, as evident in works such as *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, *Areopagitica*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, rendered him not merely a luminary of the English literary tradition, but a seminal figure in the evolution of republican thought. Today, sadly, not only are most Americans unfamiliar with Milton's searing denunciations of tyranny, but his role as a significant influence on the Founding Fathers has been forgotten as well.



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"That man's soul, it seems to me, was distended as wide as creation. His power over the human mind was absolute and unlimited. His genius was great beyond conception, and his learning without bounds. I can only gaze at him with astonishment, without comprehending the vast compass of his capacity." — John Adams, entry in his commonplace book, April 30, 1756

Champion of Republicanism

John Milton (1608-1674) was born into a period of profound religious and political upheaval, which would significantly shape his intellectual and ideological development. Educated at Cambridge University and well versed in classical literature, Milton's early works were primarily poetic. However, the escalating conflict between the monarchy and Parliament, culminating in the English Civil War, steered his pursuits toward the defense of republican principles.

His transition from poet to polemicist is epitomized in his 1649 work *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. Published in the aftermath of King Charles I's execution, the treatise boldly defended the right of a people to hold their ruler accountable and to overthrow a tyrannical monarch. At its core, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* articulated a revolutionary idea: that sovereignty resided not in kingship but in the people, and that governments are instituted for the benefit of the governed, responsible for upholding justice and liberty.

Milton's arguments in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* provided an intellectual justification for the regicide and the establishment of a commonwealth, laying the groundwork for republican governance. His vision of a society free from tyrannical rule aligned with the principles later embraced by the American revolutionaries, who sought to construct a new nation founded on the ideals of liberty,



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equality, and the rule of law.

Free-speech Advocate; Demythologizing Monarchy

In 1644, amid the ferment of the English Civil War, Milton authored one of the most powerful defenses of free speech ever written: *Areopagitica*. This impassioned plea against the licensing order imposed by Parliament argued that the suppression of free expression was an affront to truth and to man's capacity for reason. Drawing on classical and biblical references, Milton contended that truth would ultimately prevail in a free and open exchange of ideas, stating, "Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?"

Areopagitica not only championed the right to free speech, but also advanced the concept of a marketplace of ideas, a notion that would become a cornerstone of democratic societies. Milton's eloquent defense of intellectual liberty profoundly influenced the American Founding Fathers, informing the rights protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Eikonoklastes, a title derived from the Greek for "image breaker," is Milton's pointed response to the *Eikon Basilike* (The Royal Image), purportedly authored by King Charles I just before his execution. Published in 1649, the *Eikon Basilike* presented Charles as a martyr, casting his execution by the Parliamentary forces as an unjust and sacrilegious act. It portrayed the king in a sympathetic light, as a devout Christian monarch unjustly persecuted by his subjects, aiming to sway public sentiment in favor of the monarchy and against the Commonwealth.

In response to such royalist propaganda, Milton authored *Eikonoklastes* in the same year, directly challenging the portrayal of Charles I and the monarchical system. His work was not merely a rebuttal, but a systematic deconstruction of the *Eikon Basilike*, aiming to dispel the mythologized image of Charles I and to criticize the principles of hereditary monarchy. Milton's sharp critique extended beyond the personal character of Charles I to address the broader issues of tyranny, divine right, and the moral and political justifications for the regicide.

Milton accused the monarchy, represented by Charles I, of betraying the nation's trust and governing with a tyrannical disregard for the welfare of its subjects. He argued that the king's actions, rather than those of the Parliamentarians, were the true cause of the civil war and the subsequent suffering of the English people.

He also asserted that the authority of rulers is derived from the consent of the governed, and that it is the right, even the duty, of the people to hold their rulers accountable. *Eikonoklastes* champions the principles of republicanism and the idea of a government that serves the common good, rather than the interests of a privileged monarchy.

Despite being all but unknown today, *Eikonoklastes* remains a testament to Milton's intellectual courage and his unwavering commitment to the ideals of republican government.

Blueprint of Republican Government

In the waning days of the Commonwealth and on the cusp of the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, Milton penned one of his most fervent appeals for the republican cause: *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*. This work was not only a response to the imminent threat of monarchical restoration, but also a visionary blueprint for the establishment of a sustainable and just



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republican government in England. Published in 1660, with a second expanded edition released shortly after, Milton's treatise outlined a detailed proposal for governance that would avoid the pitfalls of monarchical tyranny and provide a stable, democratic framework for the nation.

The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth elaborates on Milton's vision for a republican form of government, characterized by the absence of a monarchy and the establishment of a governing council. This council, elected by the people, would be responsible for the administration of the country, guided by the principles of liberty, justice, and the common good. Milton advocates for a decentralized system of governance, with power dispersed among local assemblies to ensure the engagement and representation of the citizenry in political decision making.

One of the most innovative aspects of Milton's proposal is his suggestion for a perpetual parliament, with staggered terms for its members to ensure continuity, experience, and stability within the government. This idea represented a radical departure from the existing political structures of his time, emphasizing accountability, transparency, and the prevention of corruption and tyranny.

In the face of political defeat and the disillusionment of many who had fought for the Parliamentary cause, Milton's treatise served as a rallying cry for the preservation of republican ideals. It was a work of both political philosophy and activism, aimed at influencing the course of England's future at a critical juncture in its history.

While *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* failed to prevent the Restoration, its significance lies in the boldness of its vision and its contribution to the discourse on republicanism. Milton's advocacy for a republic, particularly his ideas on representative government and the decentralization of power, would resonate through the ages, influencing later thinkers and political movements — including our own Founding Fathers — advocating for popular sovereignty, individual liberty, and an end to tyranny.

Tyrant: Charles I's authoritarian rule and despotic disregard for Parliament prompted John Milton's fervent advocacy for liberty and fearless opposition to tyranny. (Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain)





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Persecuted by Monarchy

Milton's advocacy for republican governance and his vocal opposition to tyranny placed him in a precarious position following the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. The political climate shifted dramatically against those who had supported the Commonwealth and the execution of Charles I. Milton, by virtue of his writings such as *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which justified the king's execution, and his role as secretary for foreign tongues to the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell, became a prime target for retribution.

With the restoration of the monarchy, Milton was specifically identified as a defender of the regicide. His works were deemed seditious under the new regime, leading to their public burning. *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *Eikonoklastes* were among the texts destroyed. This act of burning books was symbolic of the wider rejection of the ideas they contained and served as a public repudiation of the principles Milton had championed.

Milton's personal safety was gravely compromised during this period. In the early days of the Restoration, he was forced into hiding as Royalist forces sought to arrest those associated with the regicide and the Commonwealth's administration. His property was seized, and for a time he lived under the threat of execution. It was only through the intervention of friends — including the republican poet Andrew Marvell — and perhaps his own ill health and blindness that he avoided that fate.

Ultimately, he was arrested but spared the death penalty, likely due to his intellectual stature and intercessions on his behalf. Instead, Milton was imprisoned for a short period before being released, a decision influenced by both his declining health and the changing political considerations of the new regime.

Milton's experiences during the Restoration highlight the personal risks he faced as a consequence of his unwavering commitment to republican ideals. The physical and psychological toll of this period was significant, as he lived in a state of vulnerability, his future uncertain. Despite these hardships, his resolve in his beliefs did not waver.

The persecution Milton endured for his republican writings serves as a poignant reminder of the cost of advocating for fundamental change in times of political flux. His resilience in the face of adversity and his continued literary and intellectual output underscore the depth of his conviction and his lasting influence on the principles of liberty and governance.

Influence on the American Founding

Milton's advocacy for republicanism and his unyielding stance against tyranny found a receptive audience among the architects of the American form of government. His belief in the sovereignty of the people and the importance of accountable governance was echoed in the Declaration of Independence and *The Federalist Papers*. Moreover, *Areopagitica*, with its timeless defense of freedom of speech, directly inspired the freedoms of press and expression fundamental to the American commonwealth.

His later works, including his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, reflect a continued engagement with themes of tyranny, freedom, and the human condition.

Milton's impact on the American founding is a testament to the enduring power of his ideas. His works transcended the specific historical context of 17th-century England, embodying universal principles that



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continue to inspire those who champion liberty and justice.

Lasting Legacy

John Milton, through his profound contributions to republican thought and his unrelenting opposition to tyranny, occupies a pivotal role in the intellectual heritage of the American founding. *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, *Areopagitica*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* not only reflect his personal convictions, but also articulate a vision of governance and society that values morality, popular sovereignty, liberty, and equality for all of God's children. As we reflect on the origins of American governance and the ongoing struggle for liberty and freedom from tyranny, Milton's legacy serves as a beacon of inspiration and a reminder of the power of ideas to change the world. In the words of Milton himself: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties."



Quotable Quotes From John Milton

"It is lawful, and hath been held so through all ages, for any, who have the power, to call to account a tyrant, or wicked king." — *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

"If men within themselves would be governed by reason, and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny, of custom from without, and blind affections within; they would discern better what it is to favour and uphold the tyrant of a nation. But being slaves within doors, no wonder that they strive so much to have the public state conformably governed to the inward vicious rule, by which they govern themselves." — *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

"For indeed none can love freedom heartily, but good men: the rest love not freedom, but license: which never hath more scope, or more indulgence than under tyrants." — *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

"There can be slain, no sacrifice to God more acceptable, than an unjust and wicked King." — *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

"No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey." — *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*



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“Kings were chosen by the people not to be their lords and masters but to be their deputies and commissioners, to execute, by virtue of their entrusted power, that justice which else every man by the bond of nature and of covenant must have executed for himself, and for one another.” — *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

“That a nation should be so valorous and courageous to win their liberty in the field, and when they have won it, should be so heartless and unwise in their counsels, as not to know how to use it, value it, what to do with it, or with themselves; but after ten or twelve years’ prosperous war and contestation with tyranny, basely and besottedly to run their necks again into the yoke which they have broken, and prostrate all the fruits of their victory for nought at the feet of the vanquished...” — *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*

“For of all governments a Commonwealth aims most to make the people flourishing, virtuous, noble and high-spirited. Monarchs will never permit: whose aim is to make the people, wealthy indeed perhaps and well-fleeced for their own shearing, and [for] the supply of regal prodigality; but otherwise softest, basest, vicieusest, servilest, easiest to be kept under; and not only in fleece, but in mind also sheepishest.” — *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*

“Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon’s teeth: and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet, on the other hand, unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye.” — *Areopagitica*

“Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized and traded in by tickets, and statutes, and standards. We must not think to make a staple commodity of all the knowledge in the land, to mark and license it like our broad-cloth and our woolpacks. What is it but a servitude like that imposed by the Philistines, not to be allowed the sharpening of our own axes and coulters, but we must repair from all quarters to twenty licensing forges?” — *Areopagitica*

“For who knows not that Truth is strong, next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious.” — *Areopagitica*

“Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we injure her to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?”

— *Areopagitica*

“If it be desired to know the immediate cause of all this free writing and free speaking, there cannot be assigned a truer than your own mild, and free, and humane government; it is the liberty, lords and commons, which your own valorous and happy counsels have purchased us, liberty which is the nurse of all great wits: this is that which hath rarefied and enlightened our spirits like the influence of heaven.” — *Areopagitica*

“Ye cannot make us now less capable, less knowing, less eagerly pursuing of the truth, unless ye first make yourselves, that made us so, less the lovers, less the founders of our true liberty. We can grow



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ignorant again, brutish, formal, and slavish, as ye found us; but you then must first become that which ye cannot be, oppressive, arbitrary, and tyrannous, as they were from whom ye have freed us.” — *Areopagitica*

“Nature and laws would be in an ill case, if slavery should find what to say for itself, and liberty be mute: and if tyrants should find men to plead for them, and they that can master and vanquish tyrants, should not be able to find advocates. And it were a deplorable thing indeed, if the reason mankind is endued withal, and which is the gift of God, should not furnish more arguments for men’s preservation, for their deliverance, and, as much as the nature of the thing will bear, for making them equal to one another, than for their oppression, and for their utter ruin under the domineering power of one single person.” — *A Defense of the People of England*



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