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978-1-107-40398-7 - The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery

Rachel Hope Cleves

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The Reign of Terror in America

Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery

In the 1790s, American conservatives were profoundly shaken when their French “sister republic” collapsed into violent factionalism and civil war. Fearful that civic bloodshed and chaos might overwhelm their own new republic, northern Federalists and their Congregationalist allies reacted with a war of words directed at the French Revolution and at the Americans who supported it.

The Reign of Terror in America traces the paths by which American fears of the French Revolution’s violence gave rise, over the course of two generations, to antislavery, antiwar, and public-education movements in the United States. The first history of the American response to the Reign of Terror, this book shows how the violence in France permeated political thought in the United States. Ultimately, the bloodshed in France inspired northeastern conservatives to oppose the violence of slaveholding, provided material for their attacks on Southern slavery, and helped to spark the Civil War.

Rachel Hope Cleves is assistant professor of American history at Northern Illinois University.

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*For Galen Gibson, Nacuñán Sáez,
Gayle Dubowski, Catalina Garcia, Julianna Gehant, Ryanne Mace,
and Daniel Parmenter, victims of violence.*

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Preface

Two hundred years ago, in the small town of Medford, Massachusetts, the Reverend David Osgood, a corpulent older man of middling height and homely appearance, ascended the pulpit and delivered a sermon on the subject of self-government. He began with Proverbs 16:32, “He that is slow to anger, is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city.” The minister had his sermon committed to memory from repeated delivery. Perhaps he spoke with no particular urgency at the beginning, but as he expounded, Osgood’s speech grew quick and excited, coming “down upon his audience with the overwhelming force of a torrent.” His “heavy brow” creased and his “authoritative eye” gazed searchingly upon his congregants.

In impassioned tones, Osgood warned the assembly that “unrestrained anger” made “men as void of understanding – as fierce and dangerous, as the wild beasts of the forest.” People too often took pleasure in reading the battle stories that filled newspapers and history books. But Osgood deplored the glorification of war; “humanity weeps at those scenes of blood and ruin.” Wars and fighting came from ungoverned passions. When men learned to practice self-government, Osgood promised, “then would wars cease in the world; there would be no acts of violence and oppression, and no complaining in our streets.” Self-government held the key to a redeemed world, where civil government would cease to be necessary, swords would be beaten into ploughshares, and each person would sit under his own fig tree and vine.¹

¹ “Sermon XIII: Self-Government,” David Osgood, *Sermons* (Boston, Mass., 1824), 233–249. For physical descriptions of Osgood and his preaching style, see William Buell Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit, or, Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations: From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five with Historical Introductions* (New York, 1857), 2:72–84.

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Historians have long looked to the early national era to understand how the American belief in self-government developed. The early republic is depicted as a battleground between Democratic-Republicans like Thomas Jefferson, who believed that men could and should govern themselves, and Federalists like John Adams, who wanted to preserve government in the hands of a “natural aristocracy.”² In this binary, David Osgood falls unquestionably on the side of Adams. Osgood earned a national reputation by publishing a 1794 sermon attacking the French Revolution and the American democrats who Osgood believed wished to imitate its example.³ In the following decades, Osgood embraced the Federalist Party, publishing eleven political sermons attacking Jacobinism and democracy, defending religious orthodoxy, pillorying the Jefferson and Madison administrations, and protesting the War of 1812.⁴ An aloof man who vividly personified the privileges of his caste by eschewing any familiarity with his parishioners, Osgood was a leader among that set of men, purportedly narrow-minded and certainly elitist, who fought viciously to prevent the expansion of popular politics.

Osgood feared deeply that the United States suffered a threat from “the wild fury of popular sedition and insurrection.” Ironically, it was this conservative terror of popular political power that drove Osgood to insist upon the need for self-government. Taking off his spectacles and gazing with significance upon his congregants, Osgood insisted that the danger of insurrection should “convince us of the necessity, importance, and excellence of self-government above any other rule or power!”⁵ To Osgood, self-government

² The most recent synthesis of this historical interpretation is Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), 40–140.

³ David Osgood, *The Wonderful Works of God Are to Be Remembered: A Sermon, Delivered on the Day of Annual Thanksgiving, November 20, 1794* (Boston, 1794). The sermon sold through multiple editions and was even exported to Europe, where British conservatives read it; see William Playfair, *The History of Jacobinism, Its Crimes, Cruelties and Perfidies . . . With an Appendix, by Peter Porcupine, Containing a History of the American Jacobins, Commonly Denominated Democrats* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1796), 179–81.

⁴ For example, David Osgood, *A Discourse, Delivered February 19, 1795: The Day Set Apart by the President for a General Thanksgiving through the United States* (Boston, Mass., 1795); David Osgood, *Some Facts Evincive of the Atheistical, Anarchical, and in Other Respects, Immoral Principles of the French Republicans Stated in a Sermon Delivered on the 9th of May, 1798, the Day Recommended by the President of the United States for Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer* (Boston, Mass., 1798); David Osgood, *The Devil Let Loose, or the Wo Occasioned to the Inhabitants of the Earth by His Wrathful Appearance among Them Illustrated in a Discourse Delivered on the Day of the National Fast, April 25, 1799* (Boston, Mass., 1799); David Osgood, *A Discourse Delivered before the Lieutenant-Governor, the Council, and the Two Houses Composing the Legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, May 31, 1809, Being the Day of General Election* (Boston, Mass., 1809); David Osgood, *A Solemn Protest against the Late Declaration of War in a Discourse Delivered on the Next Lord's Day after the Tidings of It Were Received*, 2nd ed. (Exeter, N.H., 1812). Osgood also published many nonpolitical texts, such as ordination and funeral sermons.

⁵ “Sermon XIII: Self-Government”; Osgood, *Sermons*, 249. For the description of Osgood removing his glasses, see Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 2:80.

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connoted an emotional style that subordinated the violent passions to reason and equipped citizens to be orderly political subjects. This definition of self-government as obedience to authority does not conform to contemporary understandings of self-government as independence from authority.⁶ Historians' present admiration for the virtue of resistance has left little sympathy for the story of antidemocratic conservatives like David Osgood. Yet Osgood's account of self-government penetrates through the fog of the past, demanding attention. Although I cannot place myself within the walls of his church, his voice reaches out to me. His tears for the "scenes of blood" wreaked by "acts of violence" compel my interest as a historian dedicated to approaching history as a moral enterprise and as an individual who has suffered from acts of violence.⁷

Two times in the past seventeen years I have had the misfortune to experience massacres committed by savage men and the good fortune to survive. The first incident took place in December 1992 at Simon's Rock College of Bard, where I was enrolled, when one of my classmates went on a shooting rampage, killing a student and a professor and wounding four others on campus. I knew everyone involved. The shooter and I used to get in screaming fights at the seminar table; the murdered student, Galen Gibson, was a friend, and the murdered professor, Nacuñán Sáez, was my professor that semester. I published an article about this shooting a couple of years ago, to explore the ethical dilemma in writing about violence, and then I thought that I had buried the topic, so to speak.⁸ But gun violence unfortunately will continue to plague the United States as long as there are hundreds of millions of guns in circulation. And in February 2008 a student at Northern Illinois University, where I am a professor, went on a shooting rampage in the building next to my office, killing five students and wounding seventeen more. I had taught one of the injured students, and many of my colleagues and students had close connections with other victims of the shooting. The shooting at NIU viscerally restored my sense that human violence is not an exceptional phenomenon, tragic yet inexplicable, but a predictable behavior, which we must work to suppress.

Although I feel no kinship with the religious or political conservatism of David Osgood, I sympathize with his perspective that human beings are dangerously violent. In the eighteenth-century United States, the dominant religious outlook taught that all human beings were prone to sin and that homicide represented only an extreme manifestation of the violent proclivities shared by all people. But during the nineteenth century, the murderer

⁶ The moral failing of obedience as a virtue is most eloquently explored in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1977; repr., 1994).

⁷ Steven Mintz explores the function of history as a "moral enterprise" in his introduction to Steven Mintz and John Stauffer, eds., *The Problem of Evil: Slavery, Freedom, and the Ambiguities of American Reform* (Amherst, Mass., 2007).

⁸ Rachel Hope Cleves, "On Writing the History of Violence," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Winter 2004).

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became reconfigured as a “moral monster” utterly unlike normal people.⁹ Today, American culture identifies human violence as a deviation from the norm. Nonviolence is assumed; bloodshed is the aberration that must be explained. The fact that I do not share this assumption has led me to approach the history of violence from an alternative starting point, which posits not an initial premurderous moment but the continuous ever-present potential for violence, subject to both limiting and expanding historical tendencies. This book seeks to understand the pressures that the exigencies of a new republican political culture placed on violence in the early national era.

Searching for the cultural dynamics of violence in the early republic led me to David Osgood, and the vast conservative political and religious literature in which his sermon is embedded. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Federalists and their allies among the Calvinist ministry waged a fierce reaction against the violence of the French Revolution and what they perceived to be the potential for violence within American political culture. This reaction, although antidemocratic, inspired and fueled criticism of violent institutions within the United States, including southern slavery most significantly. Put off by the elitism of men like David Osgood, historians have been reluctant to study the origins or consequences of their sentiments against violence. But perhaps we can extend more sympathy to a young girl who sat in the pews each week, listening to Osgood. Born in Medford in 1802, she attended Osgood’s church and acquired an education by borrowing books from his personal library. Her beloved older brother, the Reverend Convers Francis, idolized Osgood. As an adult, she became a leading abolitionist, opponent to capital punishment, critic of animal cruelty, and advocate for women’s rights and Indians’ rights. Lydia Maria Child devoted her life to causes that transcended her childhood pastor’s vision of a well-ordered society, but her commitment to reform in many ways signified a logical extension of Osgood’s sermons against “acts of violence.” How American political culture moved from David Osgood to Lydia Maria Child is the subject of this book.

⁹ Karen Haltunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

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Acknowledgments

What a pleasure to acknowledge the goodness of other people rather than to dwell ceaselessly on their depravity. Like all books, and most especially books that begin as dissertations, *The Reign of Terror in America* owes an enormous debt of gratitude to the kindness of teachers, friends, colleagues, librarians, family members, and even strangers at conferences, who aided its author from inception to completion.

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