ant theological tradition of colonial America by virtue of Protestant immigration, saw human beings as totally corrupted by sin. Originally this idea had few political implications as long as it was restricted to individuals and confined to the church. Gradually, however, the idea of total depravity moved out of the ecclesiastical sphere and into politics. Under the right conditions, it was possible to see not only people as sinful but rulers as well.

The result was a profound change in the colonial attitude toward power. Influenced as well by English Whig political thought, the colonists began to see power as evil, aggressive, and dangerous, a view so common to the revolutionary generation that many historians see it as the heart of American revolutionary ideology. For Americans 200 years ago, power was to be distrusted, not trusted. It was to be feared, not revered. Power was human and therefore sinful. Leaders were suspect precisely because they were human; they used their authority for self-aggrandizement and to acquire even more power.

The colonists repeatedly sounded this theme of power as a potential threat. According to William Livingston, a Presbyterian layman and the first governor of the state of New Jersey, “power of all Kinds is intoxicating,” turning “the head of its Possessor” and luring its victims with “the bewitching Charms of despotic Sovereignty.” Absolute rulers “have acted more like imperial Wolves, or rather Beasts in human Shape, than rational and intelligent Beings.” Congregationalist minister Jonathan Mayhew insisted that power had “a grasping, encroaching nature . . . [It] aims at extending itself and operating according to mere will wherever it meets with no balance, check, control, or opposition of any kind.”

But it was John Adams who gave perhaps the best expression of this revolutionary understanding of power, viewed in Calvinist terms. In words that resound to our present day, Adams wrote, “Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all His laws. Our passions, ambitions, avarice, love, and resentment, etc. possess so much metaphysical subtlety and so much overpowering eloquence that they insinuate themselves into the understanding and the conscience and convert both to their party.”

Today we have largely lost or are only beginning to recover this attitude toward power. According to one poll, in 1964 seventy-six percent of the American people trusted government officials to do what was right most of the time. By 1972 that figure had fallen to fifty-two

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