Winthrop’s “Little Speech”  
5 July 1645

Following his “impeachment trial,” Winthrop delivered what he referred to as his “little speech” in order to present a short, eloquent statement of his view of government. It articulates his theory that the magistrates ruled by divine right, and that their authority was instituted not only to provide good government but also to guarantee the people’s civil liberty. He began his speech with the antithesis of authority and liberty and concluded that, far from being antithetical, one was the indispensable prerequisite of the other. It follows that the deputies in seeking to make Massachusetts a “mere democracy” and in attacking him through an impeachment trial were not only undermining the true liberty of the people but were also rebelling from a system of government ordained by God. The “Little Speech” can be found in Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 584–589.¹

The “Little Speech”

I suppose somethinge may be expected from me, vpon this charge that is befallne me, which moues me to speake now to you, yet I intend not to intermeddle in the proceedings of the Court, or with any of the persons concerned therein: onely I blesse God, that I see an Issue [outcome] of this troublesome businesse, I also acknowledge the Iustice of the Cour, & for mine owne parte, I am well satisfied, I was publicly charged, & I am publicly & legally acquited, which is all I did expecte or desire: & thoughe this be sufficient for my Iustification before men yet not so before the Lord who hathe seen so muchoe amisse in any [or my] dispensations [exercise of authority], (& even in this Affaire) as calles me to be humbled: for to be publicly & criminally charged in
this Court, is matter of humiliation. (& I desire to make a right use of it) notwithstanding I be thus acquitted If her father had spitt in her face, (sayth the Lord concerninge Miriam) should she not haue been ashamed 7: dayes? shame had lyen vpon her, what euer the occasion had been [Numbers 12:14]. I am vnwillinge to staye you from your urgent Affaires, yet give me leave (Vpon this speciall occasion) to speake a little more to this Assembly, it may be of some good use, to informe & rectifie the Judgmentes of some of the people, & may prevent suche distempers, as have arisen amongst vs. The great Questions that have troubled the Countrye, are about the Authoritie of the magistrates & the Libertye of the people: It is your selues, who have called vs to this office, & beinge called by you, we have our Authoritie from God, in waye of an Ordinance, suche as hathe the image of God eminently stamped vpon it, the Contempte & violation whereof hathe been vindicated with examples of divine vengeance: I entreate you, to consider, that when you choose magistrates, you take them from amonge your selues, men subiecte to like passions as you are: therefore when you see Infirmitie in vs, you should reflecte vpon your owne, & that would make you beare the more with vs, & not be severe censurers of the faylinges of your magistrates, when you have continuall experience of the like infirmitie in your selues & others, we account him a good servant, who breakes not his Covenant: the Covenant betweene you & vs, is the Oath you have taken of vs, which is to this purpose that we shall governe you & Judge your Causes by the rules of Godes Lawes & our owne, accordinge to our best skill: when you agree with a workeman to build you a shippe or house &c:he undertakes as well for his skill, as for his faithfullnesse, for it is his profession, & you paye him for bothe: but when you call one to be a magistrate he dothe not professe, nor vndertake to have sufficient skill for that office nor can you furnishe him with giftes &c therefore you must runne the hazard of his skill & abilitye: but if he faile in faithfullnesse, which by his Oathe he is bound vnto, that
he must Answear for: If it fall out that the case be cleare to common apprehension, & the rule cleare also, if he transgresse heere, the error is not in the skill, but in the evill of the will, it must be required of him: but if the Case be doubtfull, or the Rule doubtfull, to men of suche vnderstandinge & partes, as your magistrates are, if your magistrates should erre heer, your selues must beare it. For the other point concerninge Libertye, I observe a great mistake in the Countrye about that. There is a twofould Libertye, Naturall (I meane as our nature is now corrupt) & Civill or fœdorall: the first is common to man with beasts & other creatures: by this, man as he standes in relation to man simplye, hathe Libertye to doe what he liste, it is a Libertye to euill, as well as to good: This Libertye is incompatible & inconstant with Authoritye, & cannot endure the least restraint of the most iust Authoritye: the exercise & maintaininge of this Libertye makes men growe more evill, & in tyme to be worse then bruite beasts omnes sumus licentia deteriores [“We all degenerate in the absence of control” – Terrance], this is that greate enemy of trueth & peace, that wilde beaste which all the ordinances of God are bent against, to restraine & subdue it. The other kinde of Libertye I call Ciuill or federall, it may also be termed morall, in reference to the Covenant betweene God & man, in the morall Lawe, & the Politicke Couenantes & constitutions, amongst men themselues. This Libertye is the proper ende & obiecte of Authoritye, & cannot subsist withoute it, & it is a libertye to that onely which is good, iust & honest: this Libertye you are to stand for, with the hazard (not onely of your goodes but) of your liues, if need be: whatsoeuer crossethe this, is not Authoritye, but a distemper thereof, this Libertye is maintained & exercised in a waye of subiection to Authoritye it is of the same kinde of Libertye wherewith Ch[r]ist hath made vs free [Galatians 5:1], the womans owne choise makes such a man her husband, yet beinge so chosen he is her Lord, & she is to be subiecte to him, yet in a waye of Libertye, not of bondage: & a true wife accounts her subiection
her honer & freedome, & would not thinke her condition safe & free, but in her subiection to her husbandes Authoritye, suche is the liberty of the Church vnder the Authoritye of Christ her Ringe & husband, his yoke is so easye & sweete to her as a brides ornamentes [Matthew 11:30; Ephesians 5:22–24; Revelation 21:2], & if throughe frowardnesse or wantonnesse &c: she s[h]ake it off, at any tyme, she is at no rest in her spirit, vntill she take it vp againe: & whither her Lord smiles vpon her, & embracethe her in his armes, or whither he frownes, or rebukes, or smites her, she apprehendes the sweetnesse of his Loue in all, & is refreshed, supported & instructed by every suche dispensation of his Authoritye ouer her: on the other side, you knowe who they are that complaine of this yoake & saye, let vs breake their bandes &c: we will not haue this man to rule ouer vs: Euen so bretheren, it wilbe between you & your magistrates: if you stande for your naturall corrupt Libertyes, & will doe what is good in your owne eyes, you will not endure the least weight of Authoritye, but will murmure, & oppose, & be allwayes strivinge to shake off that yoake, but if you wilbe satisfied to enioye suche Civill & lawfull Libertyes, suche as Christ allowes you, then will you quietly & cheerfully submitt, vnto that Authoritye which is sett ouer you, in all the Administrations of it, for your good; wherein if we faile at any tyme, we hope, we shalbe willinge (by Godes assistance) to hearken to good advice, from any of you, or in any other waye of God, so shall your Libertyes be preserved, in vpholdinge the honor & power of Authoritye amongst you.

1 The introduction is adapted from the introduction to the edited version of the speech that appears among the documents section of *John Winthrop: Founding the City upon a Hill*.

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