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THE ROAD TO REBELLION

Erik J. Chaput & Russell J. DeSimone

In 1824, several months after he graduated from Harvard College, Thomas Wilson Dorr (1805–54), the son of a prominent Providence, Rhode Island, merchant, entered into a philosophical debate with his younger brother Allen (1808–89). The Dorr brothers debated whether a crime committed for the greater good of the citizenry was justifiable. Allen was in his final year of study at Phillips Exeter Academy, his brother's alma mater. Allen wanted to debate the question with members of the Golden Branch Literary Society, a secret society that Thomas had helped found six years earlier. A person "might indeed be arraigned and perhaps condemned before a civil tribunal" for trying to "enforce the will of his Creator," wrote Allen, but he would not "suffer" for "any crime morally imputable to him."¹ Nearly twenty years later, Thomas would have a unique opportunity to put this theory to the test.

In the decades after the American Revolution, many of the Founding Fathers assumed that the people would only have a passive role to play in their government. Though the 1787 Constitution was submitted for ratification by the people assembled in special conventions, the framers were, overall, cautious about explicitly invoking the revolutionary power of the citizenry. Indeed, in the years after the Peace of Paris was

¹ Allen Dorr to Thomas Dorr, July 17, 1824. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence (Box 1). John Hay Library, Brown University. For more on Thomas Dorr's relationship with his younger brother Allen see Erik J. Chaput, "The Seeds of Rebellion: Rhode Island Rebel Thomas Wilson Dorr's Exeter Experience," *The Exeter Bulletin* (Spring 2014), 34-35: http://issuu.com/exeterbulletin/docs/sp14_exeterbulletin. For a full biographical treatment of Thomas Dorr see Erik J. Chaput, *The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

signed, conservatives all across the country expressed fears that the Revolution was falling into anarchy because the people had too much power. In many ways the Framers attempted to put the genie back in the bottle during the summer of 1787. The lid, however, was never firmly closed.

Disputes over the meaning of the people's sovereignty remained very much alive in post-Revolutionary America. In the early 1840s, a group of Rhode Islanders, members of the Suffrage Association, took this view to its fullest extreme when they invoked that part of Thomas Jefferson's famous declaration against King George III that said that the people had a right to alter or abolish its government when it failed to meet their needs.

Dorr believed that citizenship was not a privilege to be enjoyed only by those with landed wealth, but a right of every adult male, vested in his person rather than in his property. With Dorr's assistance, members of the Suffrage Association were more determined than ever to enact reform. This crisis in constitutionalism was due to the state's continued reliance on a 1663 royal charter as its governing document. The charter restricted suffrage to only those men possessing real estate (a figure set at \$134 in 1798 — roughly \$2,500 today), thereby disenfranchising most of the population from the commercial and manufacturing districts who were renting their dwellings. Repeated reform efforts had been squashed by a recalcitrant state legislature in the 1820s and 1830s.²

In February 1841, the Suffrage Association petitioned the General Assembly for the abrogation of the Charter and the establishment of a constitution. When the Assembly ignored the petition, the Suffrage Association turned to agitation to keep its cause in the

² See Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society Publications, 1977), 184-235.

public's eye. Massive parades and processions, with attendance in the thousands, became commonplace in Providence and Newport. Banners with slogans of, "Worth makes the man, but sand and gravel make the voter" and "Peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must" were carried by workingmen during these mass meetings. The suffrage newspaper the *New Age* reported in its issue of April 23, 1841:

While the bells for the first time in this city were ringing to the call of equal rights. The people began to assemble in their different Wards. And form themselves into companies under the direction of ward marshals and at the time appointed were conducted by the assistant marshals of the day to their different stations on Benefit street, and formed a line extending nearly the whole length of the street. The right of the procession resting on Wickenden street, were the Butchers of the city, on horseback, under the direction of their marshal, John Parkus, Esq. with white frocks and a blue sash, with a splendid banner in the centre, bearing on it a representation of the Ox which they so generously presented us, with the motto, '*I die for Liberty*;' on the reverse '*Always ready*.'³

The events mirrored the new way of politicking first manifested in the "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" presidential campaign of 1840 in which Whig candidate William Henry Harrison bested Democrat Martin Van Buren at the polls. Former Governor William C. Gibbs linked the activities of the Suffrage Association with the rule of a "mob."⁴ For Gibbs and other like-minded conservatives, the issue was not one involving majority and minority rights; it was, rather, the difference between "constitutional authorities sustained by the highest judicial tribunals and a mob which organizes itself, elects a governor of Misrule, and declare it's by virtue of its own sovereign will, the true and legal government."⁵

³ See John B. Rae, "The Great Suffrage Parade" for a full description of the suffrage parade on April 17, 1841 in *Rhode Island History* (July, 1942), 90-94.

⁴ Gibbs to Francis, March 11, 1842. See Digital edition of the Henry A.L. Brown Deposit on the Dorr Rebellion Project Site: <http://bit.ly/gibbs-to-francis>

⁵ *National Intelligencer*, May 21, 1842.

By the summer of 1841, Dorr had emerged as the intellectual spokesman and leader of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association.⁶ Frustrated by previous failed attempts at constitutional reform and rebukes by the Legislature, the Rhode Island Suffrage Association, called for a constitutional convention to draft a new instrument of government. The resulting People’s Constitution was overwhelmingly ratified in a three-day plebiscite in late December 1841. In 1842, Dorr’s goal was to implement the People’s Constitution, a document that he believed had been ratified by the majority of white male voters.⁷ The stringent property qualifications for voting, which stemmed from the state’s continued use of the 1663 colonial charter, were removed in the People’s Constitution. The sitting legislative assembly, however, never authorized nor accepted the vote on this constitution. Richard K. Randolph, speaker of the House of Representatives, in a letter to the *Providence Journal* shortly after the ratification of the People’s Constitution admitted that he had underestimated “public opinion” and the “demand” for an “extensive extension of suffrage.”⁸

For Dorr, the signing of the 1776 Declaration of Independence meant that the right to revolution was “an inherent right of the people, which they could at all times peacefully exercise.”⁹ The Jeffersonian right of revolution—the right to make the world new again—was one of Dorr’s bedrock moral principles. Dorr’s’ opponents were equally as passionate. Two of his younger brothers, Sullivan Jr. and Henry, both condemned his actions in the spring of 1842.

⁶ Refer to the Gallery page of this website for three ribbons worn by members of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association at mass rallies in 1841.

⁷ Refer to the Constitutions page of this website to see the People’s Constitution and the 1843 constitution: <http://library.providence.edu/dps/projects/dorr/constitutions.html>

⁸ Richard K. Randolph to the editor of the *Providence Journal*, January 15, 1842. Richard K. Randolph Papers, University of Virginia.

⁹ *Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of Rhode Island*, 28th Cong., 1st sess. (1844), 27.

Dorr's' parents, Sullivan and Lydia (Allen) Dorr, had always hoped that their eldest son would use his considerable education to do great things.¹⁰ In the 1830s, it seemed that he was embarking on a legal career that would rival that of his hero and fellow Exeter alumnus Daniel Webster. Dorr's parents surely did not envision that their oldest son's name would ever be connected with a rebellion. In 1842, they were likely reminded of Allen Dorr's urgings that Thomas should join the ministry.

Born into wealth and privilege in 1805, Thomas Dorr seemed as a young man destined to take his place among Rhode Island's upper echelon, using his considerable legal training to live a life of gentlemanly leisure and civic pursuits. Dorr would certainly earn his place in the history books, though it was not quite in the way his father Sullivan and his mother Lydia had hoped. On April 8, 1842, from their stately home on the East Side of Providence, Sullivan and Lydia Dorr penned a short and poignant letter to their oldest and beloved son. In it, they tried desperately to persuade him to refrain from his revolutionary plans to implement a constitution that had not been authorized by the state assembly. In a letter to Connecticut Governor Chauncey Cleveland, Dorr accurately summed up the ideological viewpoint of his opponents. The "'authorities' are the ultimate source of political power in this country, that no changes of government can take place without the consent of these authorities, and that all other changes are in the nature of usurpation, and must be put down by the military power of the United States."¹¹

Dorr's parents clearly regarded him as a one-man bonfire of the vanities. "It grieves us to the heart to know that a son of ours arrived at so mature an age and so well versed in the laws of his Country should be a participant in acts calculated to bring the

¹⁰ Refer to the Gallery page of this website for images of Sullivan and Lydia Dorr.

¹¹ Thomas Wilson Dorr to Chauncey Cleveland, May 13, 1842:
<http://library.providence.edu:8080/xtf/view?docId=tei/L0019.xml;query=:brand=default>

state into destruction, arouse passions which you cannot allay, and which, God forbid, produce civil strife attended with bloodshed and murder,” they wrote.¹² They then insisted that the people could only act if they had the consent of the existing government. Anything else constituted a revolution based on raw power. Dorr did not heed their warning. He did however remain on close terms with his mother. “ You are the only person related to me, so far as I know, who entertains toward me any feelings of kindness,” wrote Dorr to Lydia a few weeks later.¹³

On April 18th, shortly after Sullivan and Lydia Dorr’s letter to their son, the People’s government held an election under its new Constitution. The result was a fore-drawn conclusion as there was no opposition to Dorr’s candidacy for governor or any of the other candidates on the People’s ticket. Dorr’s popularity was at an all time high. The Randolph family found no solace in the widespread support for Dorr. Your “father says he will not remain [in the state] if the free suffrage party prevails,” wrote Ann Maria Randolph to her daughter Elizabeth.¹⁴

On the night of May 18, a band of Dorr’s followers trained several cannon on the state arsenal in Providence, where a large contingent of charter militia troops were stationed, including several of Dorr’s brothers and uncles. The cannons never fired, however, because a light rain kept the fuses from lighting.¹⁵ Dorr promptly fled into the night. His uncles drove him out of the city to the town of Cumberland then over state line

¹² Sullivan and Lydia Dorr to Thomas W. Dorr, April 8, 1842:

<http://library.providence.edu:8080/xtf/view?docId=tei/L0012.xml;query=;brand=default>

¹³ Thomas Wilson Dorr to Lydia Dorr, May 6, 1842.

<http://library.providence.edu:8080/xtf/view?docId=tei/L0016.xml;query=;brand=default>

¹⁴ Anne Maria Lyman Randolph to Elizabeth Anne Randolph Perry, April {nd} 1842. Richard Randolph Papers, University of Virginia.

¹⁵ Refer to the Gallery page of this website for images of the attack on the arsenal.

to Bellingham, Massachusetts. Eventually, Dorr made his way to New York City, hiding with labor radicals in the Bowery Lane district.

In late June, Dorr once again attempted to resurrect the People's Government in the small village of Chepachet in northern Rhode Island. Perhaps remembering Dorr's state arsenal fiasco, only a few die-hard supporters came to his aid. It was all for nothing, however; when Dorr realized that an overwhelming force of soldiers loyal to the charter government was marching from Providence to face them, he ordered his troops to disperse and, once again, fled the state.¹⁶ Many of Dorr's followers were rounded up and thrown in jail, wallowing in prison while Dorr lived in exile.¹⁷ Martial law remained in place for several months.

Dorr settled in Concord, New Hampshire, where he resided under the protection of Governor Henry Hubbard and former U.S. Senator Franklin Pierce, before he eventually gave himself up to authorities in October 1843.¹⁸ He was quickly put on trial for treason against the state at the Colony House in Newport.¹⁹ At his trial in June 1844, Dorr argued that in actuality he did not commit treason at all; he was the lawful governor of the state under the People's Constitution. He contended his opponents, in contrast, "were concerned with the work of pulling" the new government down and, therefore, "committed all the treason of '42."²⁰ The object of the citizenry, at least for the 14,000 that voted for the People's Constitution over a three day period in late December 1841,

¹⁶ Refer to the Gallery page of this website for an image of Acote's Hill drawn by prisoner of war Henry Lord.

¹⁷ For a detailed account of arrests under martial law see Russell J. DeSimone, *Rhode Island's Rebellion: Dorr's Prisoners of War* (Middletown, RI: Bartlett Press, 2009). Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸ See Erik J. Chaput, "A Governor in Exile: New Hampshire and the 'Rhode Island Question,'" *Historical New Hampshire* (Winter 2012-2013), 91-119.

¹⁹ See Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, "Newport County in the 1842 Dorr Rebellion," *Newport History* (Fall 2014), 22-52.

²⁰ Walter S. Burges and George Turner, *The Trial of Thomas Wilson Dorr* (Providence, 1844), 54.

“was not to overthrow the government, but to continue it under the definite forms of a written constitution.” When this new government went into effect in May 1842, the old government “ceased” to exist.²¹ The fact that Dorr could find a way to restate his political philosophy is something to marvel at given the fact that he was tried in the anti-Dorrite stronghold of Newport. It mattered little to the presiding judges. Dorr was found guilty and sentenced to life at hard labor. He entered the state prison on Providence’s cove and was known simply as prisoner #56.

His sentence did not stand, however. People across the nation who were sympathetic to his cause began clamoring for Dorr’s release from the state prison in Providence. The northern Democratic slogan for the 1844 presidential election was “Polk, Dallas, and the Liberation of Dorr.”²² In June 1845, exactly one year to the day after Dorr entered the state prison in Providence, he was freed.

In 1851, the Rhode Island General Assembly restored Dorr’s civil and political rights, and three years later his conviction for treason was reversed. The following year, Dorr actively supported his friend Franklin Pierce in the presidential contest. Dorr was an ardent supporter of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and its use of popular sovereignty as a cure for the sectional problems that plagued the country. Dorr died in the bedroom he grew up in at his parent’s elegant home on the east side of Providence in December 1854, a year before Kansas delved into a bloodbath. After “Bloody Kansas” many Americans came to a realization that Dorr never did in his lifetime: democracy included a moral component that was at odds with strict majoritarianism.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See this 1844 lithograph: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661420/>

