

# Correspondence

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## Response to Review by Barry Levy

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To the Editor:

Barry Levy's assessment of my book, *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson*, as "blemished" by my "exclusion of key evidence and concepts" is not founded upon a close reading. After not identifying the core thesis, he takes points out of context, sees things that aren't there, ignores things that are, and criticizes the exclusion of peripheral topics.

My thesis distilled is that Quakers were the first to imagine a civil constitution as both perpetual and amendable, and they originated the theory and practice of civil disobedience for peaceful constitutional change. Claiming that my description of Pennsylvania is "an uniformed vision of loveliness," Levy ignores three chapters that, agreeing with earlier scholarship, find Quaker practice highly problematic. He considers my work negligent for allegedly not discussing political economy, including marriage (?), while missing the discussion of *relevant* economic behavior—boycotting, civil disobedience (a central theme he doesn't mention), and merchant interests (158, 208–10, 219–24, 331).

Likewise, Levy reveals that he hasn't read carefully any of Dickinson's work when he claims he "continually legitimate[d] violent revolution." Not once, in *any* of his writings, public or private, did Dickinson advocate revolution for America. As I make clear—dealing thoroughly with the *apparent* contradictions in Dickinson's thought—he believed in *defensive* war (192, 233–35), something quite different from revolution, which should happen only rarely (220). He could support the French Revolution (which is beyond the scope of this study) because the French, unlike the British, didn't have a constitution to protect them.

Leaving aside the numerous other, smaller misrepresentations, I trust careful readers to judge for themselves the merit of my work.

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**Response to Calvert**

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To the Editor:

Calvert has a legitimate complaint. I declared her book was “important” but said not enough about why. Calvert establishes the sway of Quaker thought in the Constitution by showing that Quakers initiated the idea of a perpetual popular regime changeable only by peaceful, if disruptive, persuasion. She also shows that John Dickinson used these ideas to urge ratification of the Constitution in his *The Letters of Fabius*.

She also shows the religious reasons why the Quakers in Pennsylvania invited many different people to settle, yet kept rule to themselves. While revealing the exclusivity of Quaker rule, she argues “. . . until the eve of the American Revolution their hegemony provoked frequent attacks, but these too only strengthened it (169).” In fact, the Quaker Party shattered in 1764 and was shaky in the 1750s, and ultimately the regime collapsed spectacularly, becoming in the 1770s America’s first failed state as Peter Silver has shown. Calvert overstates the effectiveness of Quaker welfare to win over Pennsylvania residents, as opposed to French intellectuals. Therefore, it becomes unclear whether Dickinson’s cautiousness reflected Quaker political ideas or was a response to the chaos they produced.

Calvert presents Dickinson as a quasi-pacifist but, according to her own portrayal, his position was that subaltern groups had the right and obligation to peacefully challenge and nullify unjust laws and then, when the defied authority sent armed enforcers, to mount a violent defense. This is closer to the views of John Adams than to those of Martin Luther King, and was a recipe for revolution.

**Barry Levy**

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