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Causes and Significances of Bacon's Rebellion

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The causes and the significance of Bacon's rebellion have been widely interpreted by many historians. The various ideas concerning the cause of the events which took place during the summer of 1676 pose a problem for students of American history. Historians have tried to prove that the insurrection in Virginia was the inspiration and forerunner of the American Revolution or that the uprising was essentially a class conflict between the small farmers and the wealthy planting aristocracy. Also, the role of Nathaniel Bacon, the leader of the rebellion, has undergone different interpretations. Writers such as Thomas J. Wertenbaker contend that Bacon was fighting for democracy and the rights of man, but on the other hand, historians such as Wilcomb E. Washburn believe that Bacon was merely an impetuous rabblerouser. The part played by Sir William Berkeley, the Governor of Virginia, has also undergone revision. In the past Berkeley was pictured as a tyrannical ruler, but more recent studies indicate that the old governor was a benevolent and conscientious administrator. Perhaps all of these ideas have certain merit, and it is the purpose of this paper to examine the issues and to arrive at a critical summary of the causes and the significance of Bacon's rebellion.

First of all, the insurrection did not occur because of a particular event. Instead, many grievances over a period of twenty-five years reached the point when men could no longer restrain from rebell-

ing against the established government of the colony. The Navigation Acts, overproduction of tobacco, an unfair system of taxation, Dutch raids, special favors to proprietors, the decline of representative government, aggressiveness of the frontiersmen, Indian troubles, and the character of Bacon and Berkeley were all factors in causing the rebellion. As Wesley Frank Craven points out, "... no simple answer can be found for the complex problem of Bacon's Rebellion. The irascibility of an old man who had outlived his usefulness, the temperament of a young man whose career suggests more of spirit than of balance, an accumulation of economic and political grievances, and the tragic inability to cope with the fundamental problem of Indian relations -- all have their place in the narrative."[1] It is doubtful that any one of these events would have started the uprising, but all contributed to discontent within the colony, which reached a climax known as Bacon's rebellion in 1676.

To understand the setting for the uprising, one must look at Virginia society in the seventeenth century. The population of the colony in 1671 was approximately forty thousand.[2] This number can be broken down to about thirty-two thousand free whites, six thousand indentured white servants, and two thousand Negroes.[3] The indentured servants were bound for different terms: three, five, seven, four-

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1 Wesley Frank Craven, The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century, Vol. I (Baton Rouge: Louisinana State University Press, 1949), pp. 360-361, referred to hereafter as Craven, Southern Colonies.

2 Thomas J. Wertenbaker, The Planters of Colonial Virginia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1922), p. 98, referred to hereafter as Wertenbaker, Planters.

3 John Fiske, Old Virginia and Her Neighbors, Vol. II (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1897), p. 6, referred to hereafter as Fiske, Virginia.

teen, or twenty-one years. The longest periods were for the convicts who were beginning to enter the colony in appreciable numbers, and the shortest terms were for respectable persons who were forced to sell their services for the passage and expense of emigration to the New World. When the indentured servants gained their freedom, they were given small amounts of land, and in a short time many became employers of labor. This group formed the small landowners. They had no capital save their own labor, and were therefore the group that was most severely hurt by a decline in the price of the staple farm products, chief of which was tobacco.[4]

The land system in Virginia helped to develop an aristocratic society. Each importer of labor was entitled to fifty acres of land, but in order to secure the property, it had to be seated within a specified time.[5] Actually, the technical requirements meant little in practice.[6] Land was also subject to a quitrent, and if the tax was not paid when due or if the land was not seated within the required time, then the property was forfeited.[7] Many of the rich

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4 Edward Channing, History of the United States, Vol. II (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 82.

5 There were different interpretations of what constituted seating. In some areas requirements were thought to have been satisfied if the patentee had erected a small cabin, put a small stock of cattle in the woods, or planted a small crop of tobacco or corn. The idea was for the land to be improved much like homesteading on the American frontier during the nineteenth century. Philip A. Bruce, Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century, Vol. I (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1898), p. 553, referred to hereafter as Bruce, Economic History.

6 Channing, History of the United States, Vol. II, p. 81.

7 Quitrents were an annual rent of twelve pense for every fifty acres of land. This payment was not to begin until seven years after the land was obtained. Bruce, Economic History, Vol. I, p. 556.

planters were able to obtain thousands of acres of land by buying the forfeited estates, thus adding to their holdings.[8]

The introduction of slavery was also an important step in the formation of a Virginia aristocracy. By the use of slaves wealthy men were able to cultivate profitably new acres of land while the yeoman farmers soon exhausted their small holdings by overcultivation and were forced to face failure or move into frontier regions.[9] During the first fifty years of the seventeenth century the conditions were most favorable to the small independent farmers, and many became members of the House of Burgesses or county officials. But in the later years of the century, as the large plantations grew and the wealthy planters became more powerful, the small farmers retained less and less political and social importance.[10] As new settlers entered the colony their sole desire seemed to be to gain land for the production of tobacco. With no organized middle class to balance the power of the wealthy planters, and as the slave competition increased, the growth of a dominant aristocracy was inevitable.[11]

Thus, Virginia society in the seventeenth century was very similar to English society. The great bulk of the population came from an English background, and the entire colony was influenced by the ideas, traditions, and customs characteristic of the Mother

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8 Channing, History of the United States, Vol. II, p. 82.

9 Louis B. Wright, The First Gentlemen of Virginia (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1964), p. 45, referred to hereafter as Wright, Gentlemen of Virginia.

10 Ibid., p. 48.

11 Ibid., p. 49.

Country. While there was no order of nobility in Virginia, the line that separated the various classes was as distinct in the Old Dominion as in England.[12]

England in the middle of the seventeenth century was engaged in a world contest with the Dutch for the carrying trade of the colonies. The merchantmen from the Netherlands quite often landed in Virginia and Maryland where the liberal prices paid for tobacco by the Dutch assured them an enthusiastic welcome. The exports (nearly all tobacco) from the colonies were often carried in Dutch bottoms rather than English ships. This interference from the Netherlands was a source of great irritation to the English, and later it led to several wars with the Dutch. The British government believed that it was unjust for the colonies to provide a source of wealth for her rivals since the American colonies had been founded at great expense.[13] The Navigation Act of 1651 was aimed directly at the Dutch. In its application to America it meant that the English colonies could trade only with the English and in English or colonial ships.[14] The Navigation Acts were not designed in any tyrannical spirit, but instead, in the seventeenth century, colonies and plantations were regarded as existing solely for the benefit of the

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12 Philip A. Bruce, Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century, Vol. II (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910), pp. 606-607, referred to hereafter as Bruce, Institutional History.

13 Thomas J. Wertenbaker, Virginia Under the Stuarts, in The Shaping of Colonial Virginia (New York: Russell & Russell, 1910), p. 116, referred to hereafter as Wertenbaker, Virginia Under Stuarts.

14 John Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, pp. 45-46.

Mother Country.[15] In view of this idea, the trade and industry of a colony had to be regulated to contribute most to the sea power, commerce, and industry of the home nation, which in turn provided protection for the colonies.[16] Sir Josiah Child expressed the common view of the mercantilists when he wrote about 1660, "... all Colonies or plantations do endamage their Mother-Kingdoms, whereof the Trades of such Plantations are not confined by severe Laws, and good execution of those laws, to the Mother-Kingdom."[17]

The Act of 1651 was not strictly enforced by the Commonwealth government, and two new Acts were passed in the reign of Charles II. The Acts of 1660 and 1663, however, were not rigorously enforced until the passage of the Administrative Act of 1696.[18] Nevertheless, as a result of the Acts the British merchants believed that if the Dutch wanted tobacco, they would have to pay three or four shillings for it when the cost was only a half a penny in Virginia. The merchants of the Netherlands, however, took a different view of the matter; they began planting their own tobacco in the East Indies which made it less necessary to buy from the English.[19] This further reduced the already glutted market for Virginia tobacco.

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15 Wertenbaker stated that if the colonies could fit themselves into the system prescribed, all would be well and good; if they found this impossible they would have to suffer. Wertenbaker, Planters, p. 86.

16 Mary Johnson, Pioneers of the Old South: A Chronicle of English Colonial Beginnings (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918), p. 245, referred to hereafter as Johnson, Pioneers.

17 Ibid., citation not given.

18 Ibid., p. 247.

19 Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, p. 47.

The Navigation Acts appear to have played a minor role in the causes of Bacon's rebellion, but the Acts were partly responsible for the low price of Virginia tobacco. Charles M. Andrews wrote that the colonial objections to the Acts were exaggerated and that Virginia suffered very little from the enumeration laws.[20] But Philip A. Bruce wrote, "There is no doubt that the Acts, by keeping alive a sense of friction, left the people in just the state of mind to seize with eagerness on the more palpable wrongs which were specifically brought forward as the justification for resistance. It was really the groundwork of the movement, though if it had been the only cause, might not have precipitated open resistance to the Government."[21] For the principal effect of the Navigation Acts on Virginia and Maryland was that it lowered the price of tobacco and caused the rise in price of all goods coming into the colonies.

Nevertheless, the overproduction of the tobacco crop in the years preceeding the rebellion seems to be the most significant cause for the low price of the commodity, just as the Dutch interference with English shipping appears to have been the main reason for the rise in prices for all goods coming into the colony. It was suggested that the value of tobacco would increase by governmental restraint upon the planting of the annual crop. By limiting the supply of tobacco, the price would have to rise, but to achieve these ends cooperation had to be secured from Maryland and North Carolina. In 1662 many of the planters and merchants petitioned

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20 Charles M. Andrews, Colonial Period in American History, Vol. IV (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), p. 138.

21 Wertenbaker, Planters, p. 172n.

Charles II to forbid the planting of tobacco in Maryland and Virginia for one year. At first the petition was rejected, but later the Privy Council authorized a Virginian Commission to confer with Maryland for the purpose of finding the best method for reducing the excess crop. A meeting was held on May 12, 1664, which recommended that the planting of tobacco after the twentieth of June each year should be prohibited. The report met with approval by Virginia, but the Maryland planters believed that a partial cessation would be detrimental to their interests and their legislature refused to give its consent.[22] As the prices dropped and poverty became more general, the Virginians once again appealed to Maryland, this time for total cessation for one year. Governor Berkeley journeyed to Maryland and at last succeeded in convincing the leading men of that colony of the necessity of cessation. As a result, the Maryland Assembly passed an act prohibiting all tobacco planting in their province from February 1666 to February 1667, provided Virginia and North Carolina did the same. The Virginia Assembly quickly passed a similar law, but the North Carolinians because of Indian troubles delayed their action so long that the Marylanders repudiated the entire agreement. Again the Virginians, after further negotiations, succeeded in obtaining agreement for cessation from all three colonies. The outcome, however, was that Lord Baltimore prohibited the execution of articles for cessation, and the well-made plans for relieving the glutted tobacco market came to an end.[23]

With the failure of the project Governor Berkeley wrote, "This

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22 Wertenbaker, Virginia Under Stuarts, pp. 121-122.

23 Ibid., p. 122.

overtook us like a storm and enforced us like distressed marriners to throw our dear bought commodities into the sea, when we were in sight of our harbour, & with them so drown'd not only our present reliefs but all future hopes of being able to do ourselves good, whilst we are thus divided and enforced to steere by others compasse, whose needle is too often touched with particular interest. This unlimited and independent power ... of the Lord Baltimore doth like an impetuous wind blow from all those seasonable showers of your Majesty's Royall cares and favours, and leaves us, and his own province withering and decaying in distress and poverty.... This unreasonable and unfortunate prohibition ... hath not only increased the discontent of many of the inhabitants of his province, but hath raised the grief and anger of allmost all your ... subjects of this colony to such a height as required great to prevent those disturbances which were like to arise from their eluded hopes and vain expences."[24]

The low price of tobacco continued to plague the colonists, and it must be considered as one of the major causes of Bacon's rebellion. In 1664 the whole tobacco crop of Virginia was worth less than three pounds fifteen shillings for each person in the colony.[25] In 1668 the price of tobacco was half a cent a pound and in 1675 the value had risen to only a little less than a penny a pound.[26] In view of the low price of the crop, Thomas Ludwell wrote in 1667 to Lord Berkeley

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[24] Ibid., pp. 122-123, citing Berkeley to king, P. R. O., COI-21.

[25] Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, p. 52.

[26] Samuel Eliot Morison, The Oxford History of the American People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 111, referred to hereafter as Morison, Oxford History.

in London, "there were but three influences restraining the small landowners of Virginia from rising in rebellion, namely, faith in the mercy of God, loyality to the king, and affection for the government."[27]

These conditions hurt the small planters much more than the larger ones. The profit which had once made it possible for the freedman to advance rapidly and for the poor man to get out of debt was entirely wiped out. Ludwell commented in 1668, "no one could any longer hope to better himself by planting tobacco."[28] In 1676 John Goode said, "The poverty of Virginia is such that the major part of the inhabitants can scarce supply their wants from hand to mouth, and many there are besides can hardly shift without supply one year."[29] During his trip to London in 1661 Governor Berkeley protested, "Wee cannot but resent that 40,000 people should be impoverished to enrich little more than 40 merchants, who being the whole buyers of our tobacco, give us what they please for it. And after it is here sell as they please, and indeed have 40,000 servants in us at cheaper rates, than other men have slaves, for they find them meat and drink and clothes. We furnish ourselves and their seamen with meat and drink, and all our sweat and labor as they order us, will hardly procure us coarse clothes to keep us from the extremities of heat and cold."[30] In 1673 Berkeley also admitted that at least one-third of the freedmen

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27 Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, p. 52, citing Bruce, Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century, i. 394.

28 Wertenbaker, Planters, p. 91.

29 Ibid., citing British Public Record Office, CO 5-1371, pp. 232-240. Dialogue Between John Goode and Nathaniel Bacon, Colonial Entry Book, 1677.

30 Ibid., pp. 94-95, citing British Museum, Egerton Manuscript, 2395, f. 3566.

had been rendered so helpless that in case of a foreign war, the loyality of these men could not be relied upon.[31]

There is little question that the Navigation Acts and the overproduction of tobacco were instrumental in causing Bacon's rebellion. They produced discontent within the colony and contributed to the grievances of many people who later joined with Bacon.

The wars of 1664 and 1672 with Holland also did much to add to the distress of Virginia. The Dutch were angered by the English Navigation Acts and they raided English ships at every opportunity.[32] These wars between England and Holland led to an attack in 1667 by the Dutch on several ships in the James River. Much to the dismay of the Virginians eighteen English merchant ships were carried off. Six years later the Dutch again destroyed eleven English vessels anchored near Jamestown.[33]

The colony was greatly distressed by the Dutch depredations, but the planters suffered more during the wars from the stagnation of trade. The great risk involved in crossing the Atlantic brought about an increase in freight rates and in all manufactured goods. In 1667 the governor and Council declared that the planters were forced to pay twelve to seventeen pounds per ton of freight on their tobacco which usually cost only about seven pounds. In 1673 Berkeley complained that the number of vessels that came to Virginia was so small

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31 Wertenbaker, Virginia Under Stuarts, p. 123.

32 Ibid., p. 127.

33 Charles McLean Andrews, Colonial Self-Government 1652-1689, Vol. V (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1904), pp. 213-214, referred to hereafter as Andrews, Colonial Self-Government.

that they had "not brought goods and tools enough for one part of five of the people to go on with their necessary labor. And those few goods that are brought have Soe few (and these hard Dealings) Sellers and Soe many Indigent and necessitous buyors that the Poore Planter gets not the forth part... for his tobacco which he usually has had in other times.[34]

Two other incidents occurred which added to the growing poverty and misery in Virginia. In 1667 a hail storm and hurricane destroyed much of the tobacco and grain crops, plus ravaging approximately ten thousand houses.[35] Also, in the winter of 1672-3 an epidemic occurred which destroyed more than half the cattle in Virginia. The mortality was increased by the cold, which was unusually severe. Many men, in an effort to preserve their animals, gave them all their corn and thus brought hunger upon themselves. Before relief came in the spring, fifty thousand cattle had perished.[36]

Another cause of discontent was King Charles II's recklessness in awarding land in the New World. This policy was beneficial to the king because it was an easy way to pay debts, and the labor involved in making the land valuable was entirely up to the grantee. The trouble with this policy was that too often the king granted land that was already occupied. A flagrant case of this occurred in Virginia in 1673 when Charles made a grant to the Earl of Arlington and Lord Culpeper of all lands in Virginia south of the Rappahannock

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[34] Wertenbaker, Virginia Under Stuarts, pp. 130-131, citing P. R. O., COI-30-17.

[35] Ibid., pp. 131-132.

[36] Ibid., pp. 132-133.

River for a period of thirty-one years with all rents and arrears in rents of all land since 1669. "It gave them power to grant lands and to confirm former grants; authority to establish counties, parishes, and towns; the status of 'sole and absolute patrons' of all churches, with authority to establish churches, colleges, schools, and other institutions, and to nominate and present ministers and teachers; and to appoint all sheriffs, surveyors, and other officers of the Colony and of the counties. The Governor and Council were ordered to enforce this grant and were forbidden to make any more grants of land in Virginia. No guarantees protecting Virginians were included."[37]

The effect of this action turned Virginia into something similar to a proprietary government, with Arlington and Culpeper as proprietors. The king had not intended that these men should take over land that had already been acquired by a valid title, but instead only the escheated lands -- lands that reverted to the crown because of faulty title. Nevertheless, many escheated lands were occupied by persons who had bought the property in good faith, and they were threatened with removal from their land. Moreover, the grant was made without consulting the people of Virginia. When news of the grant reached the Old Dominion, the House of Burgesses immediately dispatched a group of commissioners to make a formal protest to the king. Charles was rather surprised to hear that the Virginians cared anything about such a trifle; he then promised to satisfy everyone.[38]

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37 Richard L. Morton, Colonial Virginia, Vol. I (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 208.

38 Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, p. 54.

The Virginia commissioners had obtained from the grantees a renunciation of the grant, with the exception of the quitrents and escheats when the civil war in the colony postponed any further action.[39] By 1681 the matter was close to final settlement when Arlington disposed of his claims to Culpeper, who three years later gave up his rights to the king in return for a twenty-year annuity, paid by a poll tax in Virginia.[40] The Arlington-Culpeper grant was not an immediate cause of Bacon's rebellion, but it did provide a source of anger to the people who were threatened with the loss of their land and the burden of extra taxes to carry on the negotiations to regain their rights.

Another basic grievance of the people was the matter of taxation. The Assembly's policy of taxation was neither farsighted nor just. The councillors were paid by exemption from taxes, which became a heavy burden on the people when the taxes were increased. Taxes were imposed with little regard for the needs and conditions of the people, especially in the years before the rebellion. The Assembly in 1663 levied a tax of thirty pounds of tobacco per poll to help in the building of towns, but the towns never flourished and the money was wasted. To defend the colony against the Dutch and Indians, a number of levies was made for the erection of forts, but these strongholds were of little use against either the Dutch or the Indians. Some of the heaviest taxes were enacted in 1675 and 1676, when the distress of the population

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39 Andrews, Colonial Self-Government, Vol. V, p. 214.

40 Herbert L. Osgood, The American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century, Vol. III (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), pp. 251-252, referred to hereafter as Osgood, American Colonies.

was manifest.[41] In all matters of taxation the opinion of the people was that the taxes were designed for the special benefit of a favored few.[42]

The role played by Sir William Berkeley after 1660 also appears to have caused discontent among many people. Berkeley, however, was not merely a courtier and aristocrat, for at times he was a very conscientious administrator. He was a scholar of distinguished attainments, and in 1629 he had earned a Master of Arts from Merton College, Oxford.[43] Bruce described the governor as "Handsome in person and polished in manner; he was in temper often impulsive and headstrong; in spirit, always masterful, and sometimes domineering, should his passions be aroused; courageous to recklessness; and on the smallest provacation ready to uphold his honor with the sword at his side."[44] Berkeley's career in Virginia lasted nearly thirty-five years.

During Berkeley's first term as Governor of Virginia, lasting from 1642 to 1652, he ruled the colony wisely. He appointed to seats in his council several men who had been instrumental in deposing Sir John Harvey. Harvey had been removed as governor over a dispute concerning the extent of northern Virginia. The crown had favored Lord Baltimore's claim, while Harvey had supported William Claiborne who claimed the same area. In this way Berkeley gained a

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41 Andrews, Colonial Self-Government, Vol. V, pp. 209-210.

42 Morton, Colonial Virginia, Vol. I, p. 222.

43 Philip A. Bruce, Virginia Plutarch, Vol. I (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1923), p. 71.

44 Ibid., p. 72.

favorable position in the eyes of the crown, as did many of the influential men of the colony.[45] Berkeley also combatted attempts of the London Company to recover its former control over the colony, and during the Indian uprising of 1644 Berkeley was able to restore peace quickly. Robert Beverley in his history wrote that Berkeley after his election to his second term as governor was "... a Governor, whom they all entirely loved, and had unanimously chosen; a Gentleman who had devoted his whole Life and Estate to the Service of the Country...."[46] Indeed, it appears that during his first term as governor, Berkeley was truly popular with the people.[47] Since he was a staunch supporter of Charles I, Berkeley was forced from office from 1652 to 1660. While living in retirement at his estate near Jamestown, he entertained Cavalier guests and drank health to the king.[48] After Cromwell's death the Assembly of Virginia showed its royalist sentiments by electing Berkeley governor in March 1660, about two months before Charles II was proclaimed King of England. This election was confirmed by the king several months later.[49] It was during his second term, however, that the people began to complain of Berkeley's misrule.

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45 Oliver P. Chitwood, A History of Colonial America (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948), p. 86, referred to hereafter as Chitwood, Colonial America.

46 Robert Beverley, The History and Present State of Virginia, edited by Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), p. 74.

47 Berkeley later defended his position concerning Bacon's rebellion in a letter to Henry Covertry when he wrote that he (Berkeley) had been a good ruler, and the rebellion had resulted from the will of God. Sir William Berkeley, "A History of Our Miseries," William and Mary Quarterly (July, 1957), p. 406.

48 Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, p. 55.

49 Chitwood, Colonial America, p. 89.

From the beginnings of the colony most of the governmental offices were in the hands of men with wealth and position. Philip A. Bruce stated "In Virginia, as in England, the large landowner carried so much weight that he found no difficulty in securing the election of a son to the House, especially if that son had shown that he possessed decided abilities.... The broader the plantation, and the more numerous the proprietor's slaves and herds, the more extensive was the influence exercised by him among voters belonging to his own calling, and the more easily he obtained the advancement of any person of his own blood aspiring to enter public life."[50] Bruce also wrote:

> It is not going too far to say that the members of the Council appropriated to themselves all those higher offices of the colony which were attended with the largest salaries, or presented the most numerous chances for money-getting. They deliberately disregarded the fact that the concentration of these offices in so few hands brought about serious damage to the public interests whenever the Councillor was required by his incumbency of two separate positions to perform two sets of duties really in conflict with each other; a Councillor, for instance, was called upon to pass upon the correctness of his own accounts as collector; as collector, he was obliged, for his own enlightenment as a judge of the General Court, to inform himself of all violations of the Navigation Acts; as a farmer of the quitrents, he practically owed the success of his bid to himself as Councillor; as escheator, who was a ministerial officer, he took and returned the inquisitions of escheats to himself as a judical officer, and as such, passed upon points of law coming up in his own inquisitions.[51]

Even more of the political power of Virginia was concentrated in the hands of a small group during Berkeley's second term as governor. This is the reason that Berkeley has been called a tyrannical ruler, and this also played an important part in adding to the people's

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50 Wright, Gentlemen of Virginia, p. 52, citing Bruce, Institutional History of Virginia, II, p. 424.

51 Bruce, Institutional History of Virginia, Vol. II, pp. 360-361.

grievances. But it is equally true that many of Virginia's troubles were not because of the governor. In fact, he had fought hard against the Navigation Acts, the overproduction of tobacco, and the special favors to the proprietors.[52] Nevertheless, since the governor was the chief administrator of the colony, the people blamed him for all of the political and economic evils which existed.[53]

It is true that much of the governing power of the colony was being absorbed by a selected few of the population. This was another source of grievance for the people of Virginia. The lowest form of representative government in the Old Dominion was the parish. The decisions made in this body were exercised by a few chosen men, usually twelve, who composed a vestry. From the beginnings of the colony until a little after 1660, the vestrymen were elected by the people of the parish; this form was called an open vestry which had been patterned after the parish system used in England.[54] During the period of royalist reaction, however, the open vestry was quickly transformed into a closed body. In March, 1662, a law was passed which dictated that in case of death or the departure of any vestryman, the minister and vestry would select another person to fill the vacancy. The effect of this legislation was that the vestry soon became a self-perpetuating group. Since the vestry exercised great

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[52] Morton, Colonial Virginia, Vol. I, p. 217.

[53] Ibid., p. 218.

[54] Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, pp. 98-99.

powers within the parish -- making the budget, apportioning the taxes, and electing the churchwardens, who in many places were the tax collectors -- this was an important part of the colony's government. When the people lost the power of electing vestrymen, they lost the only power they had in the local government.[55]

The main checks on the governor's power had become ineffective after the restoration. Berkeley had ceased reading his orders to the Assembly, except those portions which served his purposes. Within two years after Berkeley became governor, the membership in the House of Burgesses was almost entirely different. Only eight men from the March 1660 Assembly remained in 1662. This group must have pleased the governor because for the next fourteen years he merely dismissed the Assembly each year without calling for new elections. He was able to accomplish control by a number of methods, but the most effective was his appointment of numerous local officials. These officials were often accused of making false election returns in which the governor's friends were assured a seat in the House of Burgesses.[56]

Craven points out very well how the political system of Virginia after the restoration contributed to Bacon's rebellion:

> The very nature of the colony's government, depending as it did upon a self-perpetuating control by key men in each county whose authority was formally derived from a commission issued by the governor, made of him the natural target of all complaints. County levies, hardly if any less than provincial levies, also had been heavy in recent years.... In the county, where men had their chief opportunity to observe the functioning of their government, they had taken particular notice of

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55 Ibid., pp. 99-100.

56 Morton, Colonial Virginia, Vol. I, pp. 219-220.

> the lack of popular control over taxation, of "the custome of County Courts att the laying of the levy to withdraw into a private Roome by which meanes the poore people not knowing for what they paid their levy did allways admire how their taxes could be so high." They had noted, too, with growing discontent the monopoly enjoyed by members of the court over the lucrative post of sheriff and the way in which the same group controlled the militia and the parish vestry.
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> Nor did the people miss the connection between this local control and the special privileges enjoyed by the ruling hiearchy of the province. They seem to have paid less attention than have modern students to the fact that no general election had been held for several years. They complained more perhaps of too frequent Assemblies, of their exorbitant costs, and of the way in which the prosperous members of the community took advantage of the indebtedness of their fellows to perpetuate their hold on the government.... Members of the governor's council had enjoyed for many years an exemption by law for ten heads in the levy of the poll tax....

Craven continued:

> Popular protest of abuses in provincial administration received substantial support from many of the county magistrates. Their position in the developing contest reflected again the dual nature of the authority they exercised as commissioned agents of the crown and as representatives of their respectative communities.... In 1660 they had welcomed the restoration of the royal commission and no doubt had shown since then some inclination to extract undue advantage from it, but they had expected that the governor would not take improper advantage of a necessary restoration of certain powers traditionally belonging to his office in the appointment of sheriffs, clerks, and other local officers.... Thus the administration of public affairs, at all echelons, had drifted since 1662 toward an arbitrary type of control.
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> The grievances of the people more than once reflected their discontent over the fact that political and economic advantage in their society belonged so frequently to the same men.... The issue was that of political privilege, privilege based to some extent on economic advantage and joined in the popular mind with strong suspicion of corruption, especially the corruption of public policy.[57]

The economic and political troubles were important in laying the groundwork for the rebellion, but it was the Indian conflict which

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[57] Craven, Southern Colonies, Vol. I, pp. 376-379.

actually touched off the insurrection. After the Indian uprising of 1644 the government had decided to build blockhouses and forts at key points along the frontier. These forts and the surrounding land were awarded to certain men on condition that each keep at least ten soldiers for a three-year period of garrison duty. The treaty of 1646 provided for the English to control the whole area between the York and James Rivers, and the Indians received exclusive rights to all land and hunting north of the York. Also, any trespassing by the colonists without the consent of the governor was considered a felony by the government. The Indians acknowledged the overlordship of the English and paid tribute of "twenty beaver skins att the goeing away of Geese yearely." Probably the most significant feature of the treaty was that the Indians received a guarantee of land. While the Indians were excluded from the principal area of English settlement, the idea to set aside a reservation free of the white man's intrusion represented an important change of policy.[58]

Nevertheless, the frontiersmen continued their aggressiveness in trying to obtain the Indian land.[59] The common people regarded the Indians as "vermin to be exterminated."[60] Leasing and extortion were two of the favorite methods used in gaining the Indian property.[61] In fact, a law was passed which restricted the sale of reservation land. Thomas Ludwell explained the reason for the law:

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58 Ibid., pp.362-363.

59 Marshall W. Fishwick, Virginia: A New Look At The Old Dominion (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959), p. 18, referred to hereafter as Fishwick, Virginia.

60 Morison, Oxford History, p. 112.

61 Wilcomb E. Washburn, The Governor and the Rebel (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957), p. 161, referred to hereafter as Washburn, Governor and Rebel.

> whilest the Indians had liberty to sell theire lands the english would ordinaryly either frighten or delude them into a bargaine and for a trifle get away with the ground they should live on, then he comes and settles himself there and with his cattle and hoggs and destroys all the corne of the other Indians of the towne. This fills us with complaints and will if not prevented keep our peace for ever certaine... this was a great cause of this last warr, and most of those who had thus intruded and were consequently the principall cause of it were notwithstanding amongst the forwardest in the rebellion and complained most of grievances.[62]

Since there was a close connection between the colonists desire for land and the Indian troubles which touched off the rebellion, the aggressiveness of the frontiersmen cannot be overlooked as a cause of the insurrection.

The immediate trouble with the Indians occurred in the summer of 1675 when the Doeg tribe killed two planters. Colonel Mason and Captain Brent, who commanded the military forces along the Potomac, led an expedition and killed not only the murderers but also a group of friendly Indians.[63] Soon the frontier was in an uproar as the Indians retaliated and murdered hundreds of men, women, and children.[64]

The main trouble was with an Indian tribe called the Susquehannoks. This tribe had been driven from the Chesapeake Bay area by the Seneca Indians, and by January, 1676, the Susquehannoks were conducting constant raids against the Virginia plantations.[65] The Assembly met

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62 Ibid., citing Thomas Ludwell to Secretary Coventry, Jan. 30, 1678, Longleat, LXXVIII, fol. 202.

63 Andrews, Colonial Self-Government, Vol. V, p. 215.

64 Wertenbaker, Virginia Under Stuarts, p. 147.

65 Peter Force, Tracts and Other Papers Relating to ... Colonies in North America, Vol. I (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963), Part VIII, p. 9, referred to hereafter as Force, Tracts.

to plan for the safety and defense of the country, and they decided to build a line of forts along the frontier.[66] Actually, the forts were of little benefit to the settlers since the Indians knew the location of the outposts and therefore merely stayed away from the danger. The Long Assembly did not want to carry the war into enemy territory, and therefore planned for a defensive war. Needless to say, the border counties were disappointed at the decision not to make an expedition against the Indians.[67] The frontiersmen announced "they were resolved to Plant tobacco rather than pay the Tax for maintaining Forts, that the erecting of them was a great Grievance, Juggle, and Cheat, and of no more use or service to them than another Plantation with men at it, and that it was merely a Designe of the Grandees to engrosse all their tobacco into their own hands."[68]

The people living along the frontier continued to petition the government to take a more aggressiveness action against the Indians, but the government failed to meet the demands. The people of Charles City County sent messages to Governor Berkeley asking him to commission someone to lead them against the Indians, but Berkeley instead issued a proclamation forbidding any such commission and also forbidding any requesting it.[69] Since Berkeley refused to agree to the people's

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66 Charles M. Andrews (ed.), Narratives of the Insurrections (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), pp. 107-108, referred to hereafter as Andrews, Narratives.

67 Wertenbaker, Virginia Under Stuarts, p. 152.

68 Andrews, Narratives, p. 108.

69 Morton, Colonial Virginia, Vol. I, pp. 236-237.

demands, the settlers believed that he was more interested in protecting his beaver trade than in helping his loyal subjects.[70] Popular murmurings against the governor were "that rebbells forfeitures would be loyall inheritances &c." and "that no bullets would pierce bever skins."[71]

With the threat of a new Indian attack the settlers of Charles City County began enlisting volunteers to fight the Indians with or without permission from Governor Berkeley. Angered by the murder of an overseer on one of his plantations, young Nathaniel Bacon, only recently come to the colony, visited the soldiers in camp where he was prompted to accept the command of the troops. With a force of three-hundred men and without a commission Bacon and his followers moved against the Indians. Berkeley ordered Bacon's army to return, but they refused to comply with Berkeley's orders, and they attacked and killed one-hundred fifty Indians.[72] When Bacon and his men failed to return, the governor declared the self-proclaimed army in rebellion on May 29, 1676.[73]

Berkeley raised an army and pursued the rebels, but in Jamestown during the governor's absence the people "demanded the dismantling of the forts, the dissolution of the old assembly, and the summons of a new body that should be elected by an open franchise."[74] Fearing

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70 Andrews, Narratives, p. 109.

71 Force, Tracts, Vol. I, Part VIII, p. 11.

72 Andrews, Colonial Self-Government, Vol. V, p. 217.

73 Force, Tracts, Vol. I, Part IX, p. 4.

74 Andrews, Colonial Self-Government, Vol. V, p. 217.

a complete overthrow of the government, Berkeley agreed to the demands, and after the first meeting of the new assembly in June, 1676, he pardoned Bacon. Berkeley then promised Bacon a commission to fight the Indians, but the governor later refused the grant or waited so long that Bacon anticipitated refusal which caused him to enlist five-hundred followers to gain the commission by force. Bacon and his men marched on Jamestown where he forced the governor to give him command against the Indians.[75] Later, however, Berkeley said that Bacon's commission had been acquired by illegial methods, and therefore the governor did not regard it as binding. Once again Bacon was declared a rebel and traitor. Bacon then turned his attention from the Indians and marched against Berkeley and burned Jamestown. Bacon's triumph was temporary since the rebel leader was soon stricken with fever which caused his death in October, 1676, a little over a month after his victory over Berkeley. With the death of Bacon the rebellion quickly collapsed from want of a good leader.[76]

Bacon was the inspiration for the uprising against the government, and it is important to understand his background. He was only twenty-seven years of age when he arrived in Virginia in the summer of 1674. His father, Thomas Bacon, was a wealthy Sulfolk gentleman. Bacon was well educated, had traveled widely on the continent, and was known for his extravagances. His tutor, John Ray, described Bacon as a young gentleman of "very good parts, and a quick wit," but "impatient of labor, and indeed his temper will not admit long study."[77] Bacon

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75 Ibid., p. 218.

76 Chitwood, Colonial America, pp. 94-96.

77 Washburn, Governor and Rebel, p. 18.

"could not contain himself within bounds," and after he became involved in a scheme to defraud a neighboring youth out of part of his inheritance, Bacon's father decided that the best place for his wayward son would be the New World. Therefore, Bacon was given 1,800 pounds and put on a tobacco ship headed for Virginia.[78]

Bacon was further described as "clearly an impetuous youth, brave and cordial, fiery at times, and gifted with a persuasive tongue. He was in person tall and lithe, with swarthy complexion and melancholy eyes, and a somewhat lofty demeanour... his discourse was pestilent and prevalent logical; and that it 'tended to atheism,' which doubtless means that he criticized things freely."[79] Bacon had been in Virginia only a few months when Berkeley appointed him to a seat on the Council. The governor is reported to have said, "Gentlemen of your quality come very rarely into this country -- and therefore when they do come are used by me with all respect."[80] The appointment to the Council was an honor, but apparently Bacon cared very little for political life since he attended only three meetings before embarking on his rebellion.[81] There is no evidence to show that Bacon had any desire to do anything but help protect the settlers from the Indians at the beginning of the rebellion.

With the death of Bacon, the rebellion continued only a short time under the leadership of Colonel Ingram. Ingram, however, was

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78 Ibid.

79 Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, pp. 64-65.

80 Morton, Colonial Virginia, Vol. I, p. 241, citation not given.

81 Washburn, Governor and Rebel, p. 19.

captured by Berkeley, and the rebellion finally came to an end in January, 1677.[82] Unlike the government in England after the restoration, Berkeley took harsh measures against the rebels. He denied the rebel leaders a civil trial, but instead marched his opponents in quick succession to the gallows. Herbert Osgood wrote that thirty-seven men were executed by the governor's order, and many were saved only by the acknowledgment of their treason against Berkeley.[83]

Richard Lawrence and William Drummond, Bacon's leading advisors, were especially sought by Berkeley. Lawrence had been opposed to the governor because a few years before the rebellion Berkeley had rendered a decision in which one of the governor's friends had deprived Lawrence of a considerable estate.[84] When Bacon moved against the governor, Lawrence found an ideal opportunity to advise the rebel leader in the matter of taking over the government. Wertenbaker wrote, "If we may believe Thomas Mathews who knew him well, Lawrence was the original instigator of the uprising. He himself had heard Lawrence discuss the possibility of rectifying the abuses in the government resulting from the avarice and French despotic methods of the governor.... Likewise he knew him to have been a thinking man, honest, affable, without blemish and most persuasive in conversation. Living at Jamestown, to which people resorted from all parts of Virginia, he found opportunity to 'instil his notions' in men's minds."[85] Drummond was a Scotsman

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82 Fiske, Virginia, Vol. II, p. 92.

83 Osgood, American Colonies, Vol. III, pp. 278-279.

84 Thomas J. Wertenbaker, Torchbearer of the Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 61, referred to hereafter as Wertenbaker, Torchbearer.

85 Ibid., pp. 130-131.

who had formerly been governor of North Carolina, and he was also an important supporter of Bacon.[86] Like Bacon, Drummond was primarily moved to revolt against the government because of the Indian menace.[87] When he was captured and brought before Berkeley, the governor is reported to have said, "Mr. Drummond, you are very welcome; I am more glad to see you than any man in Virginia; you shall be hanged in half an hour."[88] Lawrence managed to escape capture, and he was last seen riding into the forest near a plantation on the extreme frontier. The fate of the man is unknown after he was last seen.[89]

The English government dispatched Herbert Jeffreys, Sir John Berry, and Francis Moryson with one thousand soldiers to go to the colony in order to restore peace. These Commissioners arrived in Virginia in 1677, after the rebellion was over, and they met with a very cold reception from Governor Berkeley. When Charles II heard of Berkeley's vengeance, he said, "That old fool has hanged more men in that naked country than I have done for the murder of my father."[90] Charles gave a general pardon to the rebels and ordered Berkeley to return to England. Berkeley arrived in England in June, 1677, but died before he could present his case to the king.[91]

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86 Ibid., p. 131.

87 Ibid., p. 134.

88 Andrews, Colonial Self-Government, Vol. V, p. 222, citing T. M., Bacon's Rebellion, 23, Cal. of State Pap., Col., 1675-1676.

89 Wertenbaker, Torchbearer, p. 197.

90 John Esten Cooke, Virginia: A History of the People (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), p. 295, citation not given.

91 Morison, Oxford History, p. 115.

Bacon's rebellion did accomplish some good. No royal governor again ruled the Old Dominion with such absolute power as Berkeley had, but the basic trouble -- the low price of tobacco -- continued to plague the colony.[92] Also, all trouble did not cease. The Indians remained a menace to the planters along the frontier, and in 1682 the Tobacco Rebellion occurred in which the planters of Gloucester County destroyed the tobacco crops in order to prevent the overproduction of tobacco.[93] Virginia also suffered from the character of the men who were selected to govern the colony. This continued until 1691 when Colonel Francis Nicholson instituted a new and peaceful era as governor.[94] The benefits of Bacon's rebellion were that plural office holding was forbidden, the councillors were required to pay taxes, the vestries again became representative bodies for the work of levying county taxes, the office of sheriff was limited to two years, and the members of the House of Burgesses were elected every two years.[95] Nevertheless, probably the most significant feature of the rebellion was that people were given a chance to air their grievances to the king, but aside from the above mentioned benefits, the insurrection accomplished little.

Another important point that cannot be overlooked is the significance of Bacon. Bacon has been hailed as the defender of democracy, but this is too simple an explanation. As Thomas Mathews pointed out in his narrative, "But he [Bacon] was too young, too much a Stranger there, and of a Disposition too precipitate, to Manage things to that length those

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92 Ibid.

93 Morton, Colonial Virginia, Vol. I, pp. 301-304.

94 Andrews, Colonial Self-Government, Vol. V, p. 231.

95 Osgood, American Colonies, Vol. III, p. 279.

were Carried, had not thoughtful Mr. Lawrence been at the Bottom."[96] This explanation makes sense. Bacon was a stranger to the colony, and he had no real political or economic grievance against the government, unless some other person had influenced him to back the uprising. Lawrence was bitterly opposed to Berkeley, and it appears that Bacon was greatly influenced by Lawrence. Nevertheless, if Bacon had not been in Virginia in 1676, the rebellion probably would not have occurred. Bacon provided the inspiration and leadership. At the right moment he was pushed to the forefront, and after he was declared a traitor it was no longer possible for him to surrender to the governor. Wertenbaker has called Bacon the torchbearer of the American Revolution, but this statement has little ground for support. One cannot deny, however, that perhaps he did fight for many of the same things that men would fight for one-hundred years later, but it is doubtful that Bacon was aware of the consequences of his actions. Instead, he was moved primarly by his resentment of the governor's lack of support in the defense of the frontiers.[97]

Nor was Bacon's rebellion a class struggle between the small planters and the wealthy plantation owners. Both sides claimed men who held large tracts of land, thus eliminating any conception of a class struggle.[98] Nevertheless, most of Bacon's followers were men who had suffered from the Indian raids or who had a specific grievance against the governor. At bottom the rebellion was a protest against the economic and political evils in the colony which was touched off by

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96 Andrews, Narratives, p. 41.

97 Craven, Southern Colonies, Vol. I, p. 389.

98 Fishwick, Virginia, p. 18.

the Indian menace. Men had long complained of the wrongs which they suffered, and when the opportunity presented itself, the discontented supported Bacon.

All of the grievances that plagued the people of Virginia culminated in Bacon's rebellion. No one event or trouble can be blamed for causing the uprising, but instaed it was started by a series of grievances and the right opportunity to rebel. The insurrection grew out of misery and the government's inability to cope with the demands of the people.

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