

# Mayflower Compact or Plymouth Combination?

On the first day of our spring semester, at the little liberal arts college at which I teach, I have for the last fourteen years had the joy of watching forty freshmen respond to the complexities and depth of a seemingly simple document, that we call, the Mayflower Compact.

It really should be rather straightforward:

IN THE NAME OF GOD, AMEN. We, whose names are underwritten, the Loyal Subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James, by the Grace of God, of *Great Britain, France, and Ireland*, King, *Defender of the Faith*, & c. Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first Colony in the northern Parts of Virginia; Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid: And by Virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Officers, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due Submission and Obedience. IN WITNESS whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape-Cod the eleventh of November, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord King *James*, of *England, France, and Ireland*, the eighteenth, and of *Scotland* the fifty-fourth, *Anno Domini*; 1620.

My first thought after reading this every January for the past fourteen years is, what incredibly and pugnacious audacity these Pilgrims had. Ruling themselves with a simple agreement,

a single paragraph, and a deep and abiding faith—a faith I don't necessarily share but one I respect immensely. Who were these people, and what was their secret?

My second thought is that this could never have been composed by anyone but the most Protestant of Protestants.

Indeed, even as a practicing Roman Catholic, I have a hard time imagining the same scene being played out by French, Spanish, or Portuguese settlers. No, this is one of the great fruits of Protestantism, and it's probably one we Catholics should take to heart, especially as we continue to struggle over issues of religious freedom and freedom of conscience in our rather fallen world of the 21st century.

A cursory review of some excellent scholarship over the last fifty years reveals much about the document as well. Notably, in the introductory note to his masterfully edited work, [Colonial Origins of the American Constitution](#), everyone's favorite pirate scholar, Donald Lutz, cautions of the use of the term "compact" with the 1620 document in any manner. "The same is true for 'compact.' The term is not used in any of the titles of these colonial documents, at least not by those who wrote them," Lutz notes. Indeed, the "Mayflower Compact was not so named until 1793 and was referred to by the inhabitants of the colony as the Plymouth Combination, or sometimes simply as The Combination."

That scholars of some merit renamed the document in the 1790s—a period of deep religious skepticism—giving it a much more Lockean and secular title 173 years after its creation is very telling.

What if we simply decided to rename, say, "The Declaration of Independence" the "The Assertion of National Sovereignty" or the "Up yours, King George." Neither would be totally inaccurate, but each would certainly be a bit bizarre, and each would in some fashion change our very perception and

memory of the thing itself.

Yet, this is precisely what happened with the Plymouth Combination. Only here, the “new and improved”—meaning “liberalized and secularized”—name stuck.

In their critical and essential study of America and her self-identity, [\*Basic Symbols\*](#), Wilmoore Kendall and George Carey argue that one might very well call this the foundational document of America, a creation of the “basic symbol” around which even the Declaration and Constitution revolved and, ultimately, fulfilled.

The authors of the Combination, according to Kendall and Carey “merely established a society, not a government, so that their symbols, with the passing of time, will have to be revised in order to provide the relationship between society and government, between the social order and the specifically political order.”

While I’m sure many historians and political theorists would agree with this assertion, it has a nice logic to it. At least as I understand it.

While we could interpret the Combination from a Lockean or a Hobbesian perspective, it would be nothing short of absurd to do so. Hobbes was still thirty-one years away from writing *Leviathan*, and Locke was age negative 12 in 1620. As our own John Willson has argued emphatically for many years, America is not Lockean. If anything, the influence went the other direction—toward and on Locke from America.

Importantly, the authors of the Combination never assert the existence of a “state of nature.” Instead, they recognize they are beholden to scripture, to tradition, to a hierarchical authority, and to the English common law.

And yet, they were not prepared either to destroy these ties nor to live them out completely. Instead, they looked out upon

what they considered a virgin land, a promised land of sorts. Here, they could take the best of the past, but they could implement as they so desired.

As I prepared the lecture, I wracked my brain trying to remember an example of another, earlier assertion of self-government. Had the Greeks done it or the Jews? No, they had already relied upon a law giver. The Romans asserted something in 509BC, but I'm not sure it had quite the same texture as what the Pilgrims did in 1620.

I really couldn't come up with a significant example. For all intents and purposes, the Plymouth Combination is the first real assertion of the right to self-governance in the modern western world and one of the most important in any time or place.

As Kendall and Carey wisely claim, the 1620 document did not need to assert any rights overtly as rights. Instead, the very short paragraph—the document as a whole—is an assertion of the right. A basic symbol, indeed.

Could we really imagine the multitude of declarations of independence in 1776, or even the relatively orderly transitions from various royal governments to the extra-legals one between 1774 and 1776 without the colonial experience of self governance? Could we imagine the wagon companies and wagon trains of the nineteenth century, or even the various fraternal orders of that same century, without the legacy of the Plymouth Combination?

Overall, the Pilgrims gave only a few things to America—notably, the feast of Thanksgiving and the Plymouth Combination. But, what a contribution. The right and the assertion to self governance. To live as men because, well, we're men.

Whatever the flaws in their theology as a whole, I raise a nice glass of wine to the legacy of the Pilgrims and offer the

greatest toast a person can offer another in this world of sorrows.

“You lived and died as men and women. What more need be said? Just this: In the Name of God, Amen.”

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