

## Lesson #3

# Treasons Act of 1534

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Passed by the English Parliament in November 1534, during the reign of Henry VIII. Passed in conjunction with the *Act of Supremacy* in the same month. *It is important for the student to notice the order of events, and proximity to each other. It helps them to determine cause and effect.*

The *Treasons Act* was introduced as a blanket law to deal with people who refused to accept Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell's new policy changes. Thomas Cromwell was Henry VIII's right-hand man, his chief minister, and probably the second most powerful person in England at that time. Cromwell undoubtedly played a central role in the drafting of the *Treasons Act*, although to what extent is unknown.

Sir Thomas More was executed under this Act. More was made a saint (canonized) in the Catholic Church in 1935 as a martyr.

Prior to this Act, acts of treason were generally not met with a punishment of death. In fact, prior to this Act there were only two basic types of treason; high treason, and petty treason. High treason was for physical attacks against the royal family, or physical attempts to dethrone them. Petty treason was a physical attack against someone to which you owed allegiance other than the royal family. You should take note that for both of these types, treason only applied to tangible physical attacks.

Beginning with the *Treasons Act of 1534*, Henry VIII introduced many new and inventive ways to charge people with treason and execute them. Treason was now being applied to words and opinions. Read this excerpt carefully. It may seem like a minor law from 500 years ago, but it marks a significant change in the authority exercised by the English crown, and leads directly to the Pilgrims and Puritans sailing to America. That makes it very significant.

The act specified that all those were guilty of high treason who...

do maliciously wish, will or desire by words or writing, or by craft imagine, invent, practise, or attempt any bodily harm to be done or committed to the king's most royal person, the queen's or the heirs apparent, or to deprive them of any of their dignity, title or name of their royal estates, or slanderously and maliciously publish and pronounce, by express writing or words, that the king should be heretic, schismatic<sup>1</sup>, tyrant, infidel or usurper\* of the crown...

<sup>1</sup> schismatic: According to Catholic Church law, a schismatic is a person who, after receiving baptism, either resists papal authority or refuses to participate in Catholic life and worship.

*\* Seems like a little bit of projection going on here in this list of words, yes? Almost as if the king knows that his grab for power in the Act of Supremacy is precisely ALL of these things. It would be like someone saying, "I'm going to steal this car, but I'm not a criminal and don't you dare call me one. If you do, I'll kill you. But then, don't say that I'm a mean and nasty person either. Because I'm totally not".*

This is a new level of tyrannical control over the people of England. Not a new level of tyranny in historical terms, of course. Always remember...liberty is not humanity's default setting. Prior to the founding of the United States, tyranny and oppression were the goto methods of governing for the entire history of mankind. So, even though

tyranny has been the norm throughout history, this Act marks a new level of tyranny in England. Therefore, it is significant. You should be able to draw a connection here. Specifically, you should be able to see how the changes brought about by the *Age of Absolutism* and the belief in the *Divine Right of Kings* paved the way for this Act, whereas you can now be put to death not just for physical attacks, but for your mere words. Ironically, Thomas Cromwell learned first-hand how slippery the slope is when it comes to the exercise of power. King Henry VIII turned the tables on him and used this very Act, the one Cromwell helped write, to put Cromwell to death.

Various Treason Acts were written in England over the years leading up to the American Revolutionary War, and all of them included being put to death for expressing certain opinions about the king. **Keep that in mind:** laws that allowed the king to kill you for any words uttered against him were in force when American colonists were protesting taxes, tarring and feathering the king's appointees, and putting their signatures at the bottom of possibly the most consequential document in human history, the Declaration of Independence. They had every reason to believe these acts of resistance were going to lead to their death. After all, the Declaration was written specifically to list all the reasons why the king was a very bad, terrible man. On a side note, you should know that even today the right to free speech is not protected under British law as it is here in the U.S. **The reality is, there is no such thing as "freedom of speech" in Britain. Speech is not protected, and as such the UK has passed many laws restricting speech. Just to give one example, in 2018, a UK teenager was [arrested and convicted of a hate crime](#) for posting rap lyrics in tribute to a 13 yr. old struck and killed by a car because those lyrics contained "grossly offensive" language. If you want to know more about what the exceptions are to speech in the UK, see this link concerning the [Human Rights Act of 1998](#).**

Before completing the questions in *Did You Get That?* you will watch the first episode of Mr G's series on Colonial Foundations. Everything you have learned thus far lays the groundwork for the settling of America. We are going to start tying that together by talking about the Pilgrims search for religious freedom amid the tyrannical control over religion that we see developing in England.



*The execution of Queen Anne Boleyn, 2<sup>nd</sup> wife of Henry VIII. She was executed under the Treasons Act of 1534 at 9 o'clock in the morning on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1536. This image is from a German engraving c. 1830 (Photo: Lisby/Public Domain).*

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## MR G VIDEOS

Follow the link below, or go directly to Mr G's YouTube page and watch Episode #1 in the *Colonial Foundations* playlist. This video is mandatory for the lesson and needs to be viewed prior to completing *Did You Get That?*

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjMvB3quvrv9z0vlzJTOyGN\\_FvdYYVe9nR](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjMvB3quvrv9z0vlzJTOyGN_FvdYYVe9nR)

## Did You GET THAT?

1. Highlight, or list, the intangible (non-physical) actions that were now considered treasonous under this Act.
2. Make a connection: Describe the relationship between this Act and the Act of Supremacy.
3. Why might the new types of treason outlined in this Act be a dangerous precedent?
4. Create two fictionalized actions that someone might do which would be punishable as an act of treason under this law.

1. To “wish” or “desire” to do harm to the monarch in speech or writing. “Imagine” it. “Practice” it. Do anything to “deprive them of any of their dignity”. To say or print anything “slandorous” or “malicious” about them. To call the king a “heretic, schismatic, tyrant, infidel or usurper”. (notice how every word or phrase taken directly from the source is in quotation marks. The student must get used to doing this all the time, even when nobody but you is going to see it. It is a good habit.)
2. There are several connections that could be made. Here is one possibility: Since the Treasons Act follows almost immediately after the Act of Supremacy, it is reasonable to assume that they were jointly created. These Acts most likely were planned to go together, one being needed to enforce the other. This would show that the king was aware that his sudden grab for power in the Act of Supremacy might not be completely accepted, especially by members of Parliament and the aristocracy. In essence, the Treasons Act was written as an attempt to prevent any pushback to the Act of Supremacy.
3. My goodness, the possibilities here are endless. One of the most important reasons these new types of treason are a dangerous precedent are because they outlaw opinions. To even disagree with the king is punishable by death. This is something that our Founders understood very acutely. If you cannot speak freely about the actions of those who wield power over you, then you are little more than a slave. If you can't even use words against them, do you have any power at all? Without our words, do we have any recourse whatsoever to protect ourselves from being enslaved? The voice of the people is the first check against tyranny. If you look through history, suppressing dissent is the most important tool in the tyrant's arsenal. If you can stop people from speaking against you, you can control any situation. Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Vladimir Putin, present-day Communist China, Nicolás Maduro, Islamic theocracies, North Korea, Twitter, and Facebook. All of these people and institutions use censorship of speech to control the people. They literally have the power to re-define reality.
4. There is an unlimited number of responses that the student could give here. Here is one example: a professor at a university expresses openly to his colleagues that the king's power has become too large and unchecked.

# CONNECTION ACTIVITY

## Description

This is a short activity, designed to help you realize how history, even history that appears to have nothing in common with your everyday life, can help you to have a better understanding of the world around you today.

## Task

Research the ways in which social media platforms restrict speech. Consider the following:

- How do they do it? (What are they actually doing? Do they just delete things they don't like?)
- What reasons have they given for it? (Are there hidden reasons that are not overtly stated?)
- Who or what are these speech policies claiming to "protect" ?


You should be able to get this information from just a few websites and articles. DO NOT use Wikipedia for any of this information. Wikipedia has its place, just not here. "The Twitter Files" might be a good starting point for your research.

## Product

Complete the attached chart, simply by adding a check mark to any columns that apply to the criteria listed. Then answer the question at the bottom of the chart.

**Extend your thinking:** What is one question that you are left with after your studies in this lesson? What else are you wondering? This has to be an extension question, not simply a factual one.

YOU DO NOT NEED TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION NOW. At the end of the Unit, each student will post two of their extension questions to the forum. You will choose one question posted by another student to research and answer fully. Then, you will post a thoughtful response to two other answers.

 If you need an example of the difference between a factual and an extension question, refer to *The Church of England* reading.

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## Restricted Speech Connection Activity

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Criteria	Treasons Act of 1534	Social Media
created a set of rules that restrict speech	✓	✓
restricts speech that the enforcer of the rule does not like		
restricts speech that is considered to be lies		
restricts speech that is considered to be harmful to someone's self-esteem/dignity		
the enforcer of the rule determines what speech is deemed to be lies or harmful		
restricts the usage of certain words used to reference a particular person or group		
restricts speech that directly incites violence		
the enforcer of the rule has great power in the society		

### **Critical Thinking Question:**

If we agree that the Treasons Act of 1534 was tyrannical, given the results of the chart above, can we also call social media's restriction of free speech tyrannical? Why, or why not?