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"No Other than a Corporation": Law, Politics, and the End of the Massachusetts Bay Company

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The loss of the Massachusetts Bay Company's charter in 1684 represents a watershed event in Stuart imperial history, signifying a shift away from an early seventeenth-century imperial project defined by scattered and autonomous private colonies toward the more centralized and coherent imperial polity of the eighteenth century. This article situates the loss of the Bay Colony's charter in the context of the contemporaneous campaign against municipal corporations in England. It shows how the law and political culture associated with corporate life in England shaped the course of the struggle over Massachusetts Bay's colonial charter. In the wake of the Exclusion Crisis, officials in Whitehall developed a program to undermine the autonomy of municipal corporations in England. Those same officials then extended this program to Massachusetts, an overseas corporation that posed many of the same constitutional and political challenges as metropolitan corporations. Colonists likewise interpreted their predicament with reference to the struggle over corporate autonomy in England, leading some to advocate surrender and others to recommend resistance. The article demonstrates that the corporation—as that idea developed in England—was a critical touchstone for all parties attempting to define later Stuart imperial colonial policy.