King John and the Magna Carta

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BBC: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/magna_01.shtml

Magna Carta should not be seen as a sign of surrender. In John's mind, it was only ever a stalling action, intended to demonstrate his reasonableness to the undecided baronial majority in the run-up to inevitable hostilities. It was a bargaining chip: nothing more.

It probably meant little more to the rebels either, and the fact that they reneged on their agreement to surrender London after the signing demonstrates their disdain of the Runnymede proceedings. Still, the articles of the charter show that John had pushed his barony too far.

After an opening chapter guaranteeing the rights of the Church, the next 15 chapters were provisions designed to curb the king's exploitation of loopholes in feudal custom: limiting scutages and relief payments, and banning the abuses of privilege common in wardship. A further ten chapters dealt with finances, and another important block confirmed people's rights under the Common Law.

It is these latter that have been seen as crucial, as they subjected the king to the law of the land for the first time in Britain's history, and this clause is the only one that remains on the statute books today. Finally, they sought to ensure that the king carried out his promises, safeguarded the rebels from any comebacks, demanded that he fire his hated mercenary captains and tied the king to a council of 25 members in an effort to ensure his cooperation.

It was doomed to failure. Magna Carta lasted less than three months.

By November 1215, John had the rebels' backs to the wall. He had recaptured Rochester Castle (which had been surrendered to them in September), and was poised to strike at London.

The rebels, for their part, had offered the crown of England to Philip's son, Prince Louis of France, and he hurried reinforcements into London. John failed to grasp the nettle. Instead of striking at London in one final, decisive blow, he took the percentage option and began ravaging the rebels' heartlands.

This gave Louis time to muster an army, and on 22 May 1216, he landed at Sandwich. John had been ready to receive them, but overnight his navy was scattered by a storm and his supporters, unwilling to trust his largely mercenary force, advocated retreat. Once again, John played the percentages and withdrew.