

## **THE COERCIVE ACTS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: FROM SUPPLICATION AND APPEAL TO RESISTANCE AND DISCOVERY**

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The Boston Tea Party is a very significant event in the American Revolution. The enactment of the Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773, the dumping of tea chests into the Boston Harbor by the Boston patriots, so far as the pride, apprehensions, and patience of England were concerned, was the last straw on the camel's back and heralded the beginning of the last act of imperial-colonial relationship.

Even the supporters of the American colonies in England, like Edmund Burke and William Pitt, were enraged to hear about the Tea Party. The British Parliament passed the Coercive or the Intolerable Acts, a set of four Acts, in March and April 1774. The Boston Port Act received royal assent on March 31, 1774 and was to come to effect from June 1, 1774. It closed the port of Boston to all commerce till the East India Company had been reimbursed its loss due to the Tea Party and the King convinced that the Bostonians had been disciplined. The Massachusetts Government Act of May 20, 1774 transferred the power of the American House of Representatives to elect the Council to the Crown to appoint the Council. Town meetings in the American colonies were forbidden except for the annual election meeting of town officials. The power of choosing juries by the town meetings was handed over to the sheriffs who were supposed to act to the tune of the Royal Governors. The Administration of Justice Act of May 20, 1774 vested the power in the Governor to transfer either to Britain or to another colony for trial any magistrate, customs officer, or soldier charged for capital offence while performing his duty within the colony of Massachusetts so as to ensure him security from a hostile local jury. The Quartering Act of June 2, 1774 once again made provision for quartering of troops within the town of Boston. And to carry these Acts into effect General Gage replaced Hutchinson as Governor.

The Quebec Act, signed into law on June 22, 1774, was not related to the four "Intolerable Acts", but in its effect on the colonists and the coincidence of its passage in time, they (the colonists) associated it with the other four Intolerable Acts. This Act established a civil government with no representative assembly in the French populated Canadian province of Quebec which was under military rule since 1763. This Act extended the boundaries of the province west to the Mississippi River and South to the Ohio River and granted several privileges for the Roman Catholic Church. It provided, according to the French tradition, the trial of civil cases without juries.

These developments appeared ominous to the colonists. They apprehended the same plight for themselves if they refused to cater to the whims of Parliament. But they continued to deal with the events through their thoughts and the words. There were varieties of writings and writings on all concerned issues. They included such amusing narrative in the defense of the colonial cause like *A Pretty Story Written in the Year of Our Lord 1774* (1774) by Hopkinson and also the pamphlets of serious nature attacking the Coercive Acts and the Quebec Act. They mirrored their apprehensions of a ministerial conspiracy. They pleaded for American unity to deal with the situation. They expressed ardent American patriotism. And the most significant thing about this period is that for the first time during their struggle with the Imperial government, they began to think and write, with seriousness and conviction, of the rejection of Parliamentary authority in the colonies. It is also during this period that for the first time the King was not only viewed with suspicion, but was also leveled with a series of charges. Yet running simultaneously was their expression of love for England and advocacy of lawful and rational opposition like non-importation measures and even appeal for refraining from such measures, and of the plans of compromise between England and America.

For the colonists' mind there hardly existed any difference between the Church of Rome and the Church of England. The threat to theological freedom and the establishment of a colonial Anglican episcopate alarmed the colonists. It assumed such serious proportion that in 1775, following the passage of the Quebec Act, four Presbyterian ministers of Philadelphia addressed an open letter on this issue to their coreligionists in North Carolina. Along with the religious apprehensions, there were still greater apprehensions in the political sphere. Only four days after the news of the proposed Boston Port Act reached Boston, Josiah Quincy, Jr. wrote:

Legislators, who could condemn a whole town unheard, nay uncited to answer; who could involve thousands in ruin and misery, without suggestion of any crime by them committed; and who could so construct their law, as that enormous pains and penalties would inevitably ensue, notwithstanding the most perfect obedience to it's injunctions; ... would undoubtedly imagine the attainder and death of a private individual, for his public animadversions, a less extraordinary act of power. But all exertions of duty have their hazard. (3-4)

For over a decade the colonists looked at the measures undertaken by the Imperial government with suspicion. For them these measures, as Bailyn writes in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, "appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty"(95). They found the Coercive Acts too severe a punishment for the Boston Tea Party and could not explain to themselves that the Acts were simply a response to it. Ebenezer Baldwin viewed "the whole of the conduct of the ministry and Parliament" as "a settled fix'd plan for enslaving the colonies, or bringing them under arbitrary government" (67). He felt that this conspiracy among the ministers was the result of a longing for "arbitrary power" since "men amiable in private life have become monsters of cruelty when entrusted with arbitrary power"(75). And the colonists had ample reasons to believe so. Jefferson wrote that "single acts of tyranny" could be "ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day ; but a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguished period, and pursued unalterably through every change of ministers, too plainly" justified to be a "deliberate and systematical plan of reducing" the colonists to "slavery"(11).

In this context what the colonists needed most were unity and the determination to stand firm. And there came the exhortations from writers. Josiah Quincy, Jr. wrote :

to divide and conquer was the maxim of the Devil in the garden of Eden and to disunite and enslave hath been the principle of all his votaries from that period to the present ... The combinations, of public robbers ought, therefore, to cement patriots and heroes : and as the former plot, and conspire to undermine and destroy the common-wealth, the latter ought to form a compact for opposition - a band of vengeance. (78-79)

And the sense of unity and determination to hold on to liberty was reinforced by their feeling of a sense of maturity and greatness of American nationhood. “We look to manhood”, wrote Richard Wells in 1774, “ our muscles swell out with youthful vigour ; our sinews spring with elastic force; and we feel the marrow of Englishmen in our bones. The day of independent manhood is at hand ... In domestic life, we all allow there is a time when youth shall no longer be subject to the control of age” (33-34). And the colonist, with confidence, could declare : “ not many generations may pass away, before one of the first Monarchs of the World, on ascending his throne, shall declare with exulting joy, ‘ Born and educated amongst you, I glory in the name of AMERICAN ! ’ ” (49).

But still the colonists advocated and held on to moderate methods of opposition, and to lawful and what they considered rational opposition. Even a patriot like Wells who gloried in the name of American wrote : “The *ultima ratio* - to oppose force to force, is what the heart of every American must revolt at” (4). But, though there were some committed loyalists like Jonathan Boucher who believed “that the measure of a non-importation, and non-exportation agreement” would “ruin” or “obstruct the trade of ” Great Britain and it would “be a manifest violation of the laws of God and man, and would on conviction, be severely punished in every court of justice in the universe”(21), the general sentiment of the period was very succinctly portrayed by Wells in 1774 : “ It is a general non-importation honestly adhered to, that must work our deliverance; it is the only natural peaceable remedy in our power”(10).

But despite moderate actions like non-importation that the Americans continued to undertake even during this critical period, their thoughts took revolutionary proportions and directions. In 1766, during the Stamp Act crisis, Franklin in London, Joseph Hawley in Massachusetts and most prominently, Bland in Virginia had advanced the theory that the colonies were united to the British Empire only through the Crown and not at all through the Parliament. But they were far ahead of the time and the issue at that time was taxation, not legislation. The colonists’ denial of Parliamentary legislation and its connection with the Empire through the Crown only were openly advocated by the Massachusetts House of Representatives in its debate with Hutchinson in January 1773. But it also lived in the realm of idea and for intellectual debate only. It is the Coercive Acts that compelled the colonists toward a reformulation of their constitutional position. Only after the imposition of the Coercive Acts did the colonists begin to strongly put forth their contention with James Wilson that they were “not bound by the Acts of the British Parliament”(19) and that the “only dependency, which they ought to acknowledge, is a dependency on the Crown”(31). And Jefferson promulgated the same doctrine when he wrote :

That these are the acts of power, assumed by a body of men, foreign to our constitutions, and unacknowledged by our laws, against which we do on behalf of the inhabitants of British America, enter this our solemn and

determined protest; and we do earnestly entreat his majesty, as yet the only mediatory power between the several states of the British empire, to recommend to his parliament of Great Britain the total revocation of these acts. (16)

But Jefferson went farther in showing his disaffection with King George III and charging him with a list of oppressive acts against the colonists. He also reminded George III that “kings are the servants, not the proprietors of the people”(22) and warned him, by implication, that if he continued in “sacrificing the rights of one part of the empire to the inordinate desires of another”(23), the Americans would move toward independence.

But still there were loyalists and even most of the ardent revolutionaries had in them the dregs of loyalty and filial love for England. It was not only the loyalists like Boucher who wrote : “We may tease the mother country, we cannot ruin her” (21), but even believers in the maturity of American nationhood like Wells stated :

for with whom should we engage? - Our friends – our countrymen - Our kindred - No! Let not the base profligacy of a Ministry, abandoned to every principle of virtue, and raging for despotism, tempt such near and dear connexions to sheath the sword in each other’s bowels. There are surer, safer means to end the controversy. (4)

Such being the ethos of the period, resolute attempts were being taken toward a compromise between Great Britain and the colonies which were also given expression through the written words. The major exponent of this compromise was Joseph Galloway of Philadelphia. In a letter to Richard Jackson on August 10, 1774 he wrote that the compromise and the constitutional solution rested on both England and the colonies loosening their extreme position and retreating a little. Galloway’s famous Plan of Union proposed to guarantee “each Colony” to “retain its present constitution, and powers of regulating and governing its own internal police” and this government was designed to be “administered by a President-General, to be appointed by the King, and a Grand Council to be chosen by the Representatives of the People of the several Colonies, in their respective Assemblies”(3). The President General and the Grand Council would form “an inferior and distinct branch of the British legislature”(4). This body would have jurisdiction over general affairs relating to the colonies, but any measure respecting them to go into effect would have to receive the assent of both the British and the American Parliament.

At this time when the specter of the Coercive Acts was closing in on the colonists, the Virginia Burgesses gave a call for an inter-colonial Congress and all colonies, except Georgia, were roused to assemble together and declare a common course of action at the impending danger. That brought them to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia on September 5, 1774. And that brought there too Galloway and his supporters. The Congress began with the following objectives :

...to consult upon the present state of colonies, and the miseries to which they are and must be reduced, by the operation of certain acts of parliament respecting America, and to deliberate and determine upon wise and proper measures to be by them recommended to all the colonies, for the recovery and establishment of their just rights and liberties, civil and religious, and the restoration of union and harmony between Great Britain

and the colonies, most ardently desired by all good men. (Journals of the Congress, i, 1-2)

After almost two weeks of debate the Congress endorsed the Suffolk Resolves. These resolves were written by Warren and adopted by a convention in Suffolk County, Massachusetts on September 9. These resolves declared the Coercive Acts unconstitutional and advised the people of Massachusetts to form their own government and administer the colony until the repeal of the Coercive Acts. They also advocated economic sanctions against Great Britain and advised the people of Massachusetts to arm themselves and elect officers of the militia. On September 28 the Congress rejected Galloway's "Plan of Union" by a vote of six colonies to five. On October 14 it adopted a Declaration and Resolves. Prepared by a committee, it was a statement of colonial rights and grievances. It made a total denial of Parliamentary authority in the colonies while making a voluntary declaration of colonial willingness to submit to regulation of trade. On October 18 the Congress adopted the Continental Association for a non-importation, non-exportation, and non-consumption agreement which were to continue until a change in British policy. Congress also adopted an address to the King and another to the people of Britain and America. Voting to meet again on May 10, 1775 in the event of non-redressal of colonial grievances, it adjourned on October 22, 1774. The colonists were just three weeks ahead of Lexington and Concord when, as per schedule, they met in the Second Continental Congress on May 10, 1775. Though it was a period of war preparation, Congress on July 5, 1775, as the last effort at peace, sent the Olive Branch petition to the King. Written by Dickinson, it expressed the willingness of the colonists to be with Englishmen under a common sovereign if the King would intervene and bring about a reconciliation by recognizing their assemblies as equal to Parliament.

But the succeeding events accelerated the pace of independence. The Olive Branch Petition was rejected by the King. There was the continued build up of British naval and military forces. The King accused the colonists, in October 1775, of aiming at independence. In December Parliament prohibited all American trade. The rumor of British agents inciting the Indians in the west to attack the colonies; attempts by Lord Dunmore, the royal Governor of Virginia to bring about a slave rebellion in Virginia ; and Britain's decision to hire foreign mercenaries goaded the colonies toward independence. Still there were many who could not, till the end, reconcile with the concept of independence. But the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Jefferson, with a few amendments by John Adams and Franklin was, as Morgan writes in *The Birth of the Republic*, "phrased in the form of a sacred creed and with an elemental eloquence"(77) and was signed on July 4, 1776.

The single factor that most helped in inspiring the colonists toward independence was Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Sophia Rosenfeld writes that "Paine's efforts to employ common sense as a key form of evidence in the realm of political decision making also mark a crucial moment in the history of the conceptualization and usage of the idea itself" (633). Paine helped the colonies understand that their issue was "not the concern of a day, a year, or an age" and that posterity was "virtually involved in the contest"(30). He told them that not England but America was the future "asylum for mankind" (60) and that a "Continent" could not be "perpetually governed by an island"(45). Paine tried to free the colonists from the shackles of sentiment by arguing that "Europe and not England is the parent country of America" since America has been the "asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe" (34). He proceeded to "challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation, to show, a single advantage" that America would reap "by being connected with Great Britain"



(37). He went on to persuade the colonists : “Your future connection with Britain whom you can neither love nor honour, will be forced and unnatural, and being formed only on the plan of perfect convenience, will in a little time, fall into a relapse more wretched than the first” (41). Having persuasively told that “reconciliation” was then “a fallacious dream”(43) , he helped to convince them that nothing could settle their affairs “so expeditiously as an open and determined declaration for Independence” (77).

But the most radical and revolutionary aspects of Paine’s pamphlet were his attack on monarchy, the advocacy for a Republic and the expression of disaffection with the British Constitution. The Declaration of Independence was only directed against George III; it did not attempt to ward off monarchy. Nathan R. Perl- Rosenthal writes that when the Americans were oscillating between their feeling of allegiance to and separation from the king and monarchy, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* played a significant role in putting an end to American loyalty by arguing that God disdained kingly government. Paine laid the foundation for the dissolution of a monarchical form of government. He wrote :

Male and female are the distinctions of nature; good and bad the distinctions of Heaven; but how a race of Men came into the World so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth enquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind. (13)

And his investigation showed that nothing but misery had come from Kings. Paine stated that George III’s title of “FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE” was a sham and he tried to dispel the false notion of veneration for the King by calling him “the hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of England”(47) and “the Royal Brute of Great Britain” (57).

Paine did not stop here. He said that the “nearer any government approaches to a Republic the less benefits there is for a King” and that “ ’tis the republican and not the monarchical part of the constitution of England which English men glory in” (28). He proceeded to ask : “Why is the constitution of England sickly ?” and answered that it is “because monarchy hath poisoned the Republic; the Crown hath engrossed the Commons” (28). He finally made advocacy for the republic with the words : “The republics of Europe are all, (and we may say always) in peace” (53).

Another thing that stood in high veneration with the colonists was the Constitution of England. Here too Paine was very caustic. He wrote : “ the constitution of England is so exceedingly complex, that the nation may suffer for years together without being able to discover in which part the fault lies” and he found them “to be the base remains of two ancient tyrannies, compounded with some new Republican materials” (7). He was ahead of the time and he spoke much in advance, at least by implication, and even by suggestions, on the three issues - dissolution of monarchy, adoption of the republican form of government, and the replacement of the British Constitution by a new one - which had a great bearing on the future American State and nationhood.

The colonists did not initiate the proceedings; they only responded to the initiatives taken by the Imperial government. But the response was not simply an appeal to redress their grievances; it became, in the process, a discovery. It discovered themselves. It helped them reformulate their positions in a context beyond the colonial one and established themselves in the context of a burgeoning American State and nationhood.

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