

A Revolution to Conserve Clinton Rossiter

In the year 1765 there lived along the American seaboard 1,450,000 white and 400,000 Negro subjects of King George III of England. The area of settlement stretched from the Penobscot to the Altamaha and extended inland, by no means solidly, to the Appalachian barrier. Within this area flourished thirteen separate political communities, subject immediately or ultimately to the authority of the Crown, but enjoying in fact large powers of self-government. Life was predominantly rural, the economy agrarian, religion Protestant, descent English, and politics the concern of men of property.

To the best of the average man's knowledge, whether his point of observation was in the colonies or England, all but a handful of these Americans were contented subjects of George III. It was hard for them to be continually enthusiastic about a sovereign or mother country so far away, yet there were few signs that the imperial bonds were about to chafe so roughly. Occasionally statements appeared in print or official correspondence accusing the colonists of republicanism, democracy, and a hankering for independence, but these could be written off as the scoldings of over fastidious travelers or frustrated agents of the royal will. Among the ruling classes sentiments of loyalty to the Crown were strongly held and eloquently expressed, while the attitude of the mass of men was not much different from that of the plain people of England: a curious combination of indifference and obeisance. Benjamin Franklin, who had more firsthand information about the colonies than any other man, could later write in all sincerity, "I never had heard in any Conversation from any Person drunk or sober, the least Expression of a wish for a Separation, or Hint that such a Thing would be advantageous to America."

Yet in the summer and fall of this same year the colonists shook off their ancient habits of submission in the twinkling of an eye and stood revealed as almost an alien people. The passage of the Stamp Act was greeted by an overwhelming refusal to obey, especially among colonial leaders who saw ruin in its provisions—lawyers, merchants, planters, printers, and ministers. Although the flame of resistance was smothered by repeal of the obnoxious act, the next ten years were at best a smoldering truce. In 1775 the policies of Lord North forced a final appeal to arms, and enough Americans answered it to bring off a successful war of independence.

Dozens of able historians have inquired into the events and forces that drove this colonial people to armed rebellion. Except among extreme patriots and equally extreme economic determinists, fundamental agreement now prevails on the immediate causes of the American Revolution. Less attention has been devoted to the question: What made this people ripe for rebellion, or, more exactly, what was there about the continental colonies in 1765 that made them so willing to engage in open defiance of a major imperial policy?

One answer, perhaps the best and certainly the best-known, was volunteered in 1818 by John Adams, himself a cause of the American Revolution: "The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution." What Adams seems to have argued was that well before Lexington and Concord there existed a collective outlook called the American mind, a mind whose chief characteristics, so we learn in other parts of his

writings, were self-reliance, patriotism, practicality, and love of liberty, with liberty defined as freedom from alien dictation. It was the alien dictation of North, Townshend, Grenville, and the other shortsighted ministers of a shortsighted king that forced the American mind to assert itself boldly for the first time.

Adams did not find it necessary to describe in detail the long-range forces that had produced this mind, perhaps because that extraordinary student of political realities, Edmund Burke, had already given so perceptive a description. In his magnificent speech on conciliation with the colonies March 22, 1775, Burke singled out “six capital sources” to account for the American “love of freedom,” that “fierce spirit of liberty” which was “stronger in the English colonies probably than in any other people of the earth”: their English descent; their popular forms of government; “religion in the northern provinces”; “manners in the southern”; education, especially in the law; and “the remoteness of the situation from the first mover of government.” Implicit in Burke’s praise of the American spirit of liberty, as in Adams’s recollection of it, was a recognition that this liberty rested on firm and fertile ground, that the colonists enjoyed in fact as well as in spirit a measure of opportunity and self-direction almost unique in the annals of mankind.

The grand thesis of American history toward which Adams and Burke were groping, not altogether blindly, was rounded off by Alexis de Tocqueville a half-century after the Revolution. With one of his most brilliant flashes of insight De Tocqueville revealed the unique nature of the American Republic: “The great advantage of the Americans is that they have arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution” or, to state the thesis in terms of 1776, the Americans, unlike most revolutionists in history, already enjoyed the liberty for which they were fighting. The “real American Revolution” was over and done with before the Revolution began. The first revolution alone made the second possible.

My purpose ... is to provide an extended commentary in support of Adams, Burke, and De Tocqueville—not that this glorious threesome needs support from anyone, I accept with practically no reservations the notion that the American Revolution was wholly different in character and purpose from the French, Russian, and almost all other revolutions, and I ascribe this difference largely to the plain truth that the Americans had no need and thus no intention to “make the world over.” By 1765 their world had already been made over as thoroughly as most sensible men—most sensible white men, to be sure—could imagine or expect. Americans had never known or had long since begun to abandon feudal tenures, a privilege-ridden economy, centralized and despotic government, religious intolerance, and hereditary stratification. Americans had achieved and were prepared to defend with their blood a society more open, an economy more fluid, a religion more tolerant, and a government more popular than anything Europeans would know for decades to come. The goal of the rebellious colonists was largely to consolidate, then expand by cautious stages, the large measure of liberty and prosperity that was already part of their way of life. . . .

I think it necessary to point to four all-pervading features of the colonial experience that were hastening the day of liberty, independence, and democracy. Over only one of these massive forces did the colonists or English authorities have the slightest degree of control, and the political wisdom that was needed to keep it in tight rein simply did not exist in empires of that time.

I

The first ingredient of American liberty was the heritage from England. Burke acknowledged this “capital source” in words that his countrymen could understand but apparently not act upon.

The people of the colonies are descendants of Englishmen. England, Sir, is a nation which still I hope respects, and formerly adored, her freedom. The colonists emigrated from you when this part of your character was most predominant; and they took this bias and direction the moment they parted from your lands. They are therefore not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas, and on English principles.

“Wee humbly pray,” wrote the General Assembly of Rhode Island to the Board of Trade in 1723, “that their Lordships will believe wee have a Tincture of the ancient British Blood in our veines.” The colonists had considerably more than a tincture: at least seven in ten were English in blood, and virtually all their institutions, traditions, ideas, and laws were English in origin and inspiration. The first colonists had brought over both the good and evil of seventeenth-century England. The good had been toughened and in several instances improved; much of the bad had been jettisoned under frontier conditions. As a result of this interaction of heredity and environment, the eighteenth-century American was simply a special brand of Englishman. When it pleased him he could be more English than the English, and when it pleased him most was any occurrence in which questions of liberty and self-government were at issue. In a squabble over the question of a fixed salary between Governor Joseph Dudley and the Massachusetts Assembly, the latter could state without any sense of pretension:

It hath been the Priviledge from Henry the third & confirmed by Edward the first, & in all Reigns unto this Day, granted, & is now allowed to be the just & unquestionable Right of the Subject, to raise when & dispose of how they see Cause, any Sums of money by Consent of Parliament, the which Priviledge We her Majesty’s Loyal and Dutiful Subjects have lived in the Enjoym’ of, & do hope always to enjoy the same, under Our most gracious Queen Ann & Successors, & shall ever endeavour to discharge the Duty incumbent on us; But humbly conceive the Stating of perpetual Salaries not agreable to her Majesty’s Interests in this Province, but prejudicial to her Majesty’s good Subjects.

Southerners were, if anything, more insistent. In 1735 the South Carolina legislature resolved:

That His Majesty’s subjects in this province are entitled to all the liberties and privileges of Englishmen . . . [and] that the Commons House of Assembly in South Carolina, by the laws of England and South Carolina, and ancient usage and custom, have all the rights and privileges pertaining to Money bills that are enjoyed by the British House of Commons.

And the men of the frontier, who were having the same trouble with assemblies that assemblies were having with governors, made the echo ring.

1st. We apprehend, as Free-Men and English Subjects, we have an indisputable Title to the same Privileges and Immunities with his Majesty's other Subjects, who reside in the interior Counties of Philadelphia, Chester and Bucks, and therefore ought not to be excluded from an equal Share with them in the very important Privilege of Legislation.

These were the words of men who made much of the English tie, even when, as in the last of these instances, most of them were Scotch-Irish or German. Their traditions—representative government, supremacy of law, constitutionalism, liberty of the subject—belonged to them as Englishmen. Their institutions, especially the provincial assembly, were often looked upon as sound to the extent that they conformed to English models, or at least to colonial interpretations or recollections of those models. The rights for which they contended were not the natural rights of all men but the ancient rights of Englishmen. “It is no Little Blessing of God,” said Cotton Mather to the Massachusetts Assembly in 1700, “that we are a part of the *English Nation*.”

Throughout the colonial period the English descent and attitudes of the great majority of Americans gave impetus to their struggles for liberty. It is a momentous fact of American history that until 1776 it was a chapter in English history as well. Just as England in 1765 was ahead of the Continent in the struggle for law and liberty, so America, this extra-ordinary part of England, was even further ahead, not least because most of its leading inhabitants thought of themselves as Englishmen. Such men would not easily be cheated or argued out of their heritage—a truth that Burke did his best to advertise:

The temper and character which prevail in our colonies are, I am afraid, unalterable by any human act. We cannot, I fear, falsify the pedigree of this fierce people, and persuade them that they are not sprung from a nation in whose veins the blood of freedom circulates. The language in which they would hear you tell them this tale would detect the imposition; your speech would betray you. An Englishman is the unfittest person on earth to argue another Englishman into slavery.

The clash of imperial policy and colonial self-reliance is almost always productive of the spirit of liberty. This is especially true if the policy of the parent state is conceived purely in its own interests, and if the colonists are men of high political aptitude and proud descent. Such was the pattern of Anglo-American relations in the colonial period. From the time of the earliest settlement, which like all the important settlements was the result of private initiative, English and American opinions on the political and economic status of the colonies were in sharp conflict.

The conduct of colonial affairs by the English government rested on these assumptions: The colonies were dependents of the parent state. Since their interests were subordinate to those of England, the welfare of the latter was to be the one concern of all agencies charged with governing them. They were therefore to serve, apparently forever, as a source of wealth and support for the land out of which their inhabitants had departed. If the English government had acted on these assumptions consistently throughout the colonial period, the contrasting ideas of the colonists would have had less chance to strike deep root. But confusion at the beginning, domestic troubles in the middle, and “salutary neglect” throughout most of this period permitted the colonists to build not only

a theory but a condition of self-government. And it was this condition, of course, as some perceptive Englishmen were aware, that helped the colonies develop into prizes worth retaining by force of arms. The interests of England were, in this important sense, fatally self-contradictory.

The views of the colonists on their place in the imperial structure were somewhat mixed, ranging from the arrogant independence asserted by Massachusetts in the seventeenth century to the abject dependence argued by a handful of Tory apologists in the eighteenth. In general, the colonial attitude was one looking to near-equality in the present and some sort of full partnership in the future, all within the confines of a benevolent and protecting empire. The colonist acknowledged that for certain diplomatic and commercial purposes his destiny would rest for some time to come in the hands of men in London. But in all other matters, especially in that of political self-determination, he considered him-self a "freeborn subject of the Crown of England." Theories of the origin and nature of the colonial assemblies are a good example of these divergent views. In English eyes the assemblies were founded by royal grant and existed at royal pleasure; in American eyes they existed as a matter of right. The Board of Trade looked upon them as inferior bodies enjoying rule-making powers under the terms of their charters; the men of Virginia and Massachusetts looked upon them as miniature Houses of Commons with power to make all laws they could get away with in practice. The struggle between these assemblies and the royal governors sent to control them was the focus of conflict of colonial and imperial interests.

Had Parliament not decided to intrude its authority into colonial affairs, the old-fashioned imperial views of the English authorities and the prophetic self-governing claims of the American colonists might have co-existed for decades without producing a violent break. The tardy policies of stern control initiated by the Grenville ministry brought this long-standing conflict fully into the open. In the years before 1765 the push-and-pull of imperialism and home rule had been a spur to the growth of liberty in the colonies. In the next decade it ignited a rebellion.

II

Let us hear again from the member for Bristol.

The last cause of this disobedient spirit in the colonies is hardly less powerful than the rest, as it is not merely moral, but laid deep in the natural constitution of things. Three thousand miles of ocean lie between you and them. No contrivance can prevent the effect of this distance in weakening government. Seas roll, and months pass, between the order and the execution; and the want of a speedy explanation of a single point is enough to defeat a whole system. ... In large bodies, the circulation of power must be less vigorous at the extremities. Nature has said it. ... This is the immutable condition, the eternal law, of extensive and detached empire.

This harsh fact of geography, the remoteness of the colonies, squared the difference between imperial purpose and colonial aspiration. The early colonists, thrown willy-nilly on their own devices, developed habits of self-government and passed them on to their descendants. The descendants, still just as far if not farther from London, fell naturally into an attitude of provincialism well suited to their condition but corrosive of empire,

The lack of contact between one colony and another, the result of distance and unbelievably bad roads, allowed each to develop on its own. The diversity in character of the key colonies of Virginia, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania made a mockery of any notion of uniform imperial policy.

Worst of all from the imperial point of view, the ill effects of the in-consistency, inefficiency, corruption, stupidity, arrogance, and ignorance displayed to some degree at all times and to a perilous degree at some times by the English authorities were doubled and redoubled by the rolling seas and passing months. English laxity in enforcing the Navigation Acts and colonial habits of disobeying them were one instance of the extent to which three thousand miles of ocean could water down a policy of strict control. The technique of royal disallowance, which seemed so perfectly designed to keep the colonial assemblies in check, was likewise weakened by the mere fact of distance. For example, the disallowance in 1706 of two New Hampshire judiciary acts passed in 1699 and 1701 was never reported properly to the province, and the judiciary in that colony continued to function under these laws for a half century. And the royal governor, the linchpin of empire, was a far more accommodating fellow in Boston or Charleston than he appeared in his commissions and instructions issued from London. A governor like Sir Matthew Johnson of North Carolina, whose reports to the Board of Trade went astray four years in a row, could not have been much of a buffer against colonial urges to independence. When we realize that no regular mail-service of any kind existed until 1755, and that war disrupted communications more than one-third of the time between 1689 and 1763, we can understand how the ocean was at once a highway to freedom and a barrier to imperialism. Rarely in history have the laws of geopolitics worked so powerfully for liberty.

Had Burke ever lived in the colonies, he might have listed still another “capital source” to explain the rise of liberty in America, and thus have anticipated Frederick Jackson Turner and his celebrated thesis. We need not go all the way with Turner—“American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West”—to acknowledge the significance of the frontier in early American history. Whatever the extent of that influence in the nineteenth century, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—when America was one vast frontier and perhaps one in three Americans a frontiersman at some time in his life—it was clearly of the first importance. If we may take the word “frontier” to mean not only the line of farthest settlement to the west, but also the primitive conditions of life and thought which extended throughout the colonies in the seventeenth century and continued to prevail in many areas east of the Appalachians during most of the eighteenth, we may point to at least a half-dozen indications of the influence of the American environment.

First, the frontier impeded the transfer to America of outworn attitudes and institutions. The wilderness frustrated completely such attempts to plant feudalism in America as the schemes of Sir Ferdinando Gorges and the stillborn Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, and everywhere archaic laws and customs were simplified, liberalized, or rudely abandoned. In the matter of church-state relations the frontier was especially influential as a decentralizing and democratizing force. The positive result of this process of sloughing off the old ways was an increase in mobility, experimentation, and self-reliance among the settlers.

The wilderness demanded of those who would conquer it that they spend their lives in unremitting toil. Unable to devote any sizable part of their energies to government, the settlers insisted that government let them alone and perform its severely limited tasks at the amateur level. The early American definition of liberty as freedom from government was given added popularity and meaning by frontier conditions. It was a new and invigorating experience for tens of thousands of Englishmen, Germans, and Scotch-Irish to be able to build a home where they would at last be “let alone.”

The frontier produced, in ways that Turner and his followers have made clear, a new kind of individual and new doctrines of individualism. The wilderness did not of itself create democracy; indeed, it often encouraged the growth of ideas and institutions hostile to it. But it did help produce some of the raw materials of American democracy—self-reliance, social fluidity, simplicity, equality, dislike of privilege, optimism, and devotion to liberty. At the same time, it emphasized the importance of voluntary co-operation. The group, too, had its uses on the frontier, whether for defense or barn-raising or cornhusking. The phrases “free association,” “mutual subjection,” and “the consent of the governed” were given new content in the wilderness. Next, the fact that wages were generally higher and working conditions better in the colonies than in England did much to advance the cause of liberty. The reason for this happy condition was a distinct shortage of labor, and a prime reason for the shortage was land for the asking. The frontier population was made up of thousands of men who had left the seaboard to toil for themselves in the great forest. The results of this constant migration were as important for the seaboard as they were for the wilderness.

From the beginning the frontier was an area of protest and thus a nursery of republican notions. Under-represented in assemblies that made a habit of overtaxing them, scornful of the privileges and leadership assumed by the tidewater aristocracy, resentful of attempts to saddle them with unwanted ministers and officials, the men of the back country were in fact if not in print the most determined radicals of the colonial period. If their quaint and strangely deferential protests contributed very little to the literature of a rising democracy, they nevertheless made more popular the arguments for liberty and self-government.

Finally, all these factors combined to give new force to the English heritage of law, liberty, and self-government. The over-refined and often archaic institutions that the settlers brought along as part of their intellectual baggage were thrust once again into the crucible of primitive conditions. If these institutions emerged in shapes that horrified royal governors, they were nevertheless more simple, workable, and popular than they had been for several centuries in England. The laws and institutions of early Rhode Island or North Carolina would not have worked in more civilized societies, but they had abandoned most of their outworn features and were ready to develop along American lines. The hardworking, long-suffering men and women of the frontier—“People a little willful Inclined to doe when and how they please or not at al—were themselves a primary force in the rise of colonial self-government.

The English descent and heritage of the colonists, the conflict of imperial and colonial interests, the rolling ocean, the all-pervading frontier—these were the “forces-behind-the-forces” that shaped the history of the colonies and spurred the peaceful revolution that preceded the bloody one of 1776. . . .

III

The colonists were not completely at the mercy of their environment. Much of the environment was of their own making; and if circumstances were favorable to the rise of liberty, they did not relieve the colonists of the formidable task of winning it for themselves. The condition of liberty in 1765 was in large part the work of men determined to be free, and the questions thus arise: Who were these men who talked so much of their rights and privileges? Whence came they to America, and how did they fare? . . .

It is now generally agreed that almost all immigrants to the colonies came from the middle and lower classes. "The rich stay in Europe," wrote Crèvecoeur; "it is only the middling and the poor that emigrate." The myths of aristocratic lineage die hard, especially in Cavalier country, but diaries, shipping lists, and court minutes tell us in no uncertain terms of the simple origins of even the most haughty families of New York and Virginia. This does not mean that early America was a land of rogues and poor servant-girls. England and the Continent sent over thousands upon thousands of substantial, intelligent, propertied men and women. Yet fully half the people who came to the colonies could not pay their own passage, and gentleman immigrants, even in the seventeenth century, were amazingly few,

As a matter of fact, those twentieth-century Americans who like to go searching for an ancestor among the gentry of East Anglia may wind up with three or four among the riffraff of Old Bailey. Probably thirty to forty thousand convicts were shipped from England to the colonies in the eighteenth century, a fact that inspired Dr. Johnson's famous growl: "Sir, they are a race of convicts, and ought to be content with anything we allow them short of hanging." Their behavior in the colonies, especially in unhappy Virginia and Maryland, moved Franklin to offer America's rattlesnakes to England as the only appropriate return. Not only did transported convicts commit a large proportion of the crimes in eighteenth-century America, but their presence did much to degrade the servant class and make a callous society even more callous. The mother country's insistence on dumping "The dregs, the excrescence of England" in the colonies was a major item in the catalogue of American grievances, especially since the Privy Council vetoed repeatedly the acts through which the colonies sought to protect themselves.

Well before 1765 the colonies had begun to take on a pattern of national origins that was "characteristically American": They looked to one country for their language, institutions, and paramount culture, but to many for their population. Americans were predominantly English in origin, but they were also Scotch, Irish, German, French, Swiss, Dutch, Swedish, and African. It is impossible to fix precisely the proportions of each nationality in the total white population of 1765; the necessary statistics are simply not available. These general percentages are about as accurate as can be expected: English, 65 to 70 per cent; Scots and Scotch-Irish, 12 to 15 per cent; Germans, 6 to 9 per cent; Irish, 3 to 5 per cent; Dutch 3 per cent; all others 3 to 5 per cent. Out of a total population of 1,850,000, probably 400,000 were Negroes and mulattoes. . . . What was the total effect on society, culture, and government of this influx of nationalities into the American settlement? . . .

First, the melting pot had only just begun to heat up in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Crèvecoeur's example of the English-French-Dutch family "whose

present four sons have now four wives of four different nations” was a phenomenon more prophetic of the Republic than typical of the colonies. The great process of national fusion had made little progress by 1765. Assimilation into the English stock rather than the creation of a new people was the result of such intermarriage as took place in colonial times. Nor were all the ingredients yet in the pot; the essential racial (Teutonic-Celtic) and religious (Protestant) unity of the population must not be overlooked.

The arrival of non-English immigrants did much to weaken the hold of the mother country. The newcomer wanted to be as loyal as anyone else, but his allegiance to the Crown could have little real emotional content. The Germans were inclined to be conservatively neutral about English dominion; the Scots and Irish were, for all the loyal humility that oozed from their petitions, innately hostile to the Georges and their agents. They lacked, as one traveler put it, the “same filial attachment” to England “which her own immediate offspring have.”

Next, the influx of aliens did much to strengthen the Protestant, dissenting, individualistic character of colonial religion. The Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, and German Pietist churches were the chief beneficiaries of this immigration. The numbers and enthusiasm of these dissenting groups gave a tremendous lift to the cause of religious liberty in the colonies south of Pennsylvania.

The eighteenth-century immigrants helped democratize the political institutions that had been brought over from England and put to work in the wilderness. This was especially true of the Scotch-Irish, whose only quarrel with the representative governments of their adopted colonies was that they were not representative enough. The Germans were inclined to be politically passive; their major contribution to the coming democracy was the support they brought to the middle-class creed of industry, frugality, and self-reliance. The Scotch-Irish, on the other hand, were more politically conscious. If the controlling groups of the coastal counties refused to honor their legitimate claims to participation in public life, this rebuff served only to make their radicalism more insistent. They had little intention of altering the English-American scheme of government, but they did mean to show the world how democratic it could be. The sentiments of “leveling republicanism” were especially active on the Scotch-Irish frontier; here the “real American Revolution” went on apace.

Finally, the mere volume of immigration from Germany and Ireland had a pronounced effect on colonial life. The swarming of these industrious peoples made possible the remarkable expansion in territory and population that marked the eighteenth century in America. If the Scotch-Irishman was America’s typical frontiersman, the German was its typical farmer; and between them they made it possible for cities like Philadelphia and towns like Lancaster to grow and flourish. Though they were men of different natures, both sought the same blessing. “And what but LIBERTY, charming LIBERTY, is the resistless Magnet that attracts so many different Nations into that flourishing Colony?” ...

THE SECOND AMERICAN REVOLUTION SUCCEEDS THE FIRST

On March 22, 1765, George III gave his royal assent to the Stamp Act, a stick of imperial dynamite so harmless in appearance that it had passed both houses of Parliament

as effortlessly as “a common Turnpike Bill.” Eleven years later, July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress resolved after “the greatest and most solemn debate”

That these United Colonies are, and, of right, ought to be. Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connexion between them, and the state of Great Britain, is, and ought to be totally dissolved.

In the tumultuous years between these two fateful acts the American colonists, at least a sufficient number of them, stumbled and haggled their way to a heroic decision: to found a new and independent nation upon political and social principles that were a standing reproach to al-most every other nation in the world. Not for another seven years could they be certain that their decision had been sound as well as bold; only then would the mother country admit reluctantly that the new nation was a fact of life rather than an act of treason. The colonists were to learn at Brooklyn and Valley Forge that it was one thing to resolve for independence and another to achieve it.

Yet the resolution for independence, the decision to fight as a “separate and equal” people rather than as a loose association of remonstrating colonials, was as much the climax of a revolution as the formal beginning of one, and it is this revolution—the “real American Revolution”—that I have sought to describe. . . . By way of conclusion, I would think it useful to point briefly to those developments in the decade after 1765 that speeded up and brought to bloody conclusion “this radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections” of the hitherto loyal American subjects of George III.

The progress of the colonies in these years was nothing short of astounding. Thanks to the fecundity of American mothers and the appeal of the American land, population increased from 1,850,000 in 1765 to more than 2,500,000 in 1776. America’s troubles seemed only to make America more alluring; immigrants arrived in especially large numbers between 1770 and 1773. The westward pressure of 650,000 new colonists was, of course, enormous, and many new towns and settlements were planted in frontier lands east of the proclamation line of 1763. The sharp increase in population of the continental colonies lent support to arguments, especially popular after 1774, that Americans would some day outnumber Englishmen, and that there was “something absurd in sup-posing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.” Signs of increased wealth and well-being inspired other Americans to sing the glories of “a commerce out of all proportion to our numbers.”

Far more significant than this material progress was the quickened influence of the “forces-behind-the-forces.” . . . The English heritage, the ocean, the frontier, and imperial tension never worked so positively for political liberty as in this decade of ferment. Until the last days before independence the colonists continued to argue as Englishmen demanding English rights. The more they acted like Americans, the more they talked like Englishmen, Heirs of a tradition that glorified resistance to tyranny, they moved into political combat as English Whigs rather than American of Englishmen to complain when injured.” The other basic forces were no less favorable to the swift advance of the spirit of liberty. In a situation that called desperately for accurate information, firm decisions and resolute administration, the very distance between London and Boston frustrated the development of a viable imperial policy. In a situation that called no less desperately for

colonial understanding of the imperial difficulties facing Crown and Parliament, the push to the frontier weakened the bonds of loyalty to an already too-distant land. And the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts forced most articulate colonists to reduce the old conflict of English and American interests to the simplest possible terms. Since some Englishmen proposed to consign other Englishmen to perpetual inferiority, was it not simply a question of liberty or slavery?

The forces that had long been working for political freedom under-went a sharp increase in influence. The ancient struggle between royal governor and popular assembly took on new vigor and meaning. The depths of ill feeling were plumbed in the maneuvers and exchanges of Governors Bernard and Hutchinson and the Massachusetts legislature. The colonial press engaged in more political reporting and speculation in the single year between June, 1765, and June, 1766, than in all the sixty-odd years since the founding of the *Boston News-Letter*. In early 1765 there were twenty-three newspapers in the colonies, only two or three of which were politically conscious; in early 1775 there were thirty-eight only two or three of which were not. The spirit of constitutionalism and the demand for written constitutions also quickened in the course of the far-ranging dispute over the undetermined boundaries of imperial power and colonial rights. The word “unconstitutional,” an essential adjunct of constitutionalism, became one of America’s favorite words. Most important, the Stamp Act was a healthy spur to political awareness among all ranks of men. Wrote John Adams in 1766:

The people, even to the lowest ranks, have become more attentive to their liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them? than they were ever before known or had occasion to be; innumerable have been the monuments of wit, humor, sense, learning, spirit patriotism and heroism, erected in the several provinces in the course of this year. Their counties, towns and even private clubs and sodalities have voted and determined; their merchants have agreed to sacrifice even their bread to the cause of liberty their legislatures have resolved; the united colonies have remonstrated; the presses have everywhere groaned; the pulpits have thundered.

The thundering pulpit, an old and faithful servant of American freedom, set out to demonstrate anew the affinity of religious and political liberty. Bumptious Protestantism vied with temperate rationalism as spurs to disestablishment and liberty of conscience. Conditions for the final triumph of unqualified religious liberty grew more favorable in this unsettled decade. So, too, did conditions of economic independence. The over-all state of the American economy lent impressive support to radical claims that the colonies would get along just as well, if not better, out-side the protecting confines of British mercantilism. In wealth, resources, production, ingenuity, and energy the Americans were fast approaching the end of the colonial line. . . .

In every colony the middle class formed the nucleus of the patriot party, and in Boston it attained a position of commanding political influence. The aristocracy split into opposing camps, but the Lees of Virginia and Livingstons of New York are reminders that a decisive share of patriotic leadership fell to the American aristocrat. The political storms of the decade, which deposited power in new hands in almost every colony, did much to stimulate social mobility and class conflict. The career of the Sons of Liberty attests the growing fluidity of colonial society; the uprisings of the “Paxton Boys” in

Pennsylvania and the Regulators in North Carolina attest the heightened tensions of class and section.

Finally, the colonial mind took rapid strides forward in this period, not alone in the field of political thought. Deism, rationalism, and the scientific spirit claimed increasing numbers of men in positions of leadership. The cult of virtue enjoyed a vogue even more intense than in the colonial period. The arts showed new signs of indigenous strength. The sharp increase in the number of newspapers was matched by an even sharper increase in the output of books and pamphlets. Three new colleges opened their doors to eager students, and King's and the Philadelphia Academy instituted the first American medical schools. Despite all the shouting about English rights and ways, the colonial mind was growing steadily less English and more American. By the standards of the old world, it was a mind not especially attractive, not least because it was setting out at last to find standards of its own.

The American colonies moved fast and far between 1765 and 1776. While the King fumed, the ministry blundered, assemblies protested, mobs rioted, and Samuel Adams plotted, the people of the colonies, however calm or convulsed the political situation, pushed steadily ahead in numbers, wealth, self-reliance, and devotion to liberty. The peaceful revolution that had been gathering momentum from the time of the first settlements moved irresistibly to conclusion, and the fighting revolution could now begin. It could begin, moreover, with high hopes for its success. Blessed by a way of life that knew much freedom and held the promise of much more, the Americans, like the Englishmen who un-seated James II, could make their revolution "a parent to settlement, and not a nursery of future revolutions." This was one colonial people that went to war for liberty knowing in its bones what liberty was.

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