

*2 Oct 6, 1975 - Richard C. Brasher*

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION 1760 - 1775

In 1816, in a letter to his friend Thomas Jefferson, John Adams wrote: "What do we mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an effect or consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people, and that was effected from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years, before a drop of blood was shed."

As we celebrate the nation's Bi-Centennial, it is well to think to Adams' words and to look at those events and those changes wrought in the minds and hearts of the people which actually constituted the Revolution. In a short paper, however, it is necessary to limit our field and to examine those events which seem most pertinent. Therefore, this paper omits much. It will not attempt to review the arguments of the thinkers whose speeches and writings gave the Revolution its framework, but rather it will deal with concrete events--laws of Parliament, and actions of ministers and the king which gave substance to the arguments of men like Sam Adams and Patrick Henry, and which unified a country and caused the majority of people to lend assent to the ideas of Revolution. It is noteworthy that of all revolutions we know about, only the American Revolution was supported by a majority of the people.

Let us look briefly at the Americans of 1760. Although there were Dutch and Germans, and people of other nations represented, most were of English stock. There were about three million of them fairly well distributed along the Atlantic seaboard. They or their fathers had come as colonists

at the solicitation of a proprietor or royal agent who convinced them of the glowing opportunities open to them. Furthermore, they had been assured that they would remain Englishmen with all their traditional rights. In the usual language of a colonial charter, they were promised all the "Liberties, Franchises, and Immunities of free-born Englishmen." The fact was that no one knew what this high-sounding phrase meant; but all through the Seventeenth Century, its limits were being sought. In 1649, King Charles I lost his head in the process, and in 1688, King James II lost a throne. It was already well established that only Parliament could vote a tax upon the people. Some people even went so far as to say that a tax could not be imposed upon anyone not represented in Parliament; but on this point, however, there was nothing resembling a consensus of opinion. The colonists assuredly held this view and while their assemblies frequently remitted money to the crown, they were always careful to describe it as a gift and not a tax.

In England, ignorance about the colonies was astonishing. The typical view held by an English gentleman was that the colonists lived in a howling wilderness, little better off than the Indians with whom they constantly fought. Now most English gentlemen of this period received their income from the rents of land. They did not know that rents were quite good because wool was selling so well. Most of it was being made into clothing and exported to the colonies. Such men made up a majority of the members of Parliament and they paid little attention to those few of their members who understood the

importance of the colonies. When Robert Walpole was Prime Minister in 1740, he prevented the passage of a tax on exports to the colonies because, as he put it, it was "bad business to overcharge your best customers." Walpole knew, if others didn't, that the colonies in 1740 were taking 16 Million Pounds of English exports annually or one-third of their total export trade. By 1760, this amount had increased.

In fact, in 1760 the colonies stood in a surprising relationship to their parent. Instead of a howling wilderness, an English visitor would have found a prosperous, agricultural economy centered around four seaports, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, which were fully the equal of any city in England except great London. In these cities, the foundations of industry and commerce were being laid. The colonies supported six colleges and thirty public libraries. The income of the average American was probably greater than of his English counterpart. He was certainly more literate and books were popular imports. Edmund Burke, the great conservative, one of the few English leaders to study the American situation, learned from his bookseller that the most popular books exported to America after the Bible and devotional tracts, were law books. Nearly as many copies of Blackstone's Commentaries had been sold in America as in England. Burke thought that the American devotion to the study of the Common Law was a circumstance which worked against a peaceful solution to English-American differences. He said, "In other countries, the people, more simple, and of a less mercurial cast, judge of an ill principle in government only by an actual grievance; there they anticipate the evil, and

judge of the pressure of the grievance by the badness of the principle. They augur misgovernment at a distance, and sniff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze."

The colonial legislatures modeled themselves upon Parliament, particularly the House of Commons. They considered that they had the right to legislate in the place of Parliament because of the impracticality of representation in Parliament. They had struggled with royal governors to assert this right. Thus it was that they took the attitude where taxes were concerned that it was their place to vote a revenue for the government just as Parliament, sitting in London, would do on behalf of citizens in England. After the French and Indian War, the question of government revenue became urgent and led to the first breach between colonies and mother land.

Britain had ended the War with France victorious but almost bankrupt. This war, called in Europe the Seven Years War and in America the French and Indian War, was the first worldwide struggle between nations. It was fought in Europe, in India, and on the American continent. The cessation of hostilities found Britain in possession of Canada, the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, and the French territories in India. She had acquired the greatest empire in history which would eventually pour riches into England, but at the moment, it was costing far more than it produced.

In 1763, King George III named George Grenville to form a government. Grenville was a colorless politician who had but one virtue that could have induced the King to call on him. He was said to know more about finance and taxation than anyone else in England.

Grenville was nicknamed "The Gentle Shepherd" because of his sheeplike look and mild, plodding disposition. George III used to complain that Grenville would bore him with long-winded speeches for two hours and then look at his watch to see if he had time to bore him for another hour.

Grenville sized up his problem quite well. His job was to restore the English economy and increase the revenues of the government so that the King would have the wherewithal to do what he thought a king should do. Grenville's first concern was to pacify the conquered territories so that it would be possible to reduce the standing armies required to garrison them. In order to secure the loyalty of the French Canadians and the Indians, he issued a Proclamation in 1763 which prohibited settlement of the lands west of the Alleghenies. Colonial resentment was fierce and vocal. The colonists had borne the brunt of the Indian attacks in order to secure control of the West and this was still their goal, regardless of England's Imperial necessities. They were not consulted in the matter of the Proclamation and they were bitterly resentful of the fact that their defeated enemies were treated better than they were. The Proclamation Line was ignored and a steady flow of explorers and settlers continued to open up western Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

Grenville widened the breach even more by his next action. He asked each royal governor for a report of the problems he had within his colony and for some explanation of why revenues from excise taxes were so low. The answers were practically unanimous. The pious Puritan merchants of

Massachusetts, the solid burghers of New York, the peaceful Quakers of Pennsylvania, and the cavalier Planters of the South had one thing in common. They were all smugglers. They broke the smuggling laws openly and with impunity. Not only were English goods being brought in without payment of duties, but also goods from the West Indies, Spain, Portugal, and other nations with whom the colonists were not supposed to trade. According to the prevailing mercantilist theory, the colonies should trade only with England. They were "cows to be milked", according to someone's unhappy phrase.

In a state of righteous indignation, Grenville thought that he had solved the government's financial problem. The colonies had benefited directly from the war; they should, therefore, pay for it, but, in fact, they were criminally evading their lawful taxes and defrauding the mother country. Grenville was also aware of the political benefit to his government if taxes on the English landed gentlemen who supported the king could be lowered when the lawful revenues due from the colonies started flowing into the exchequer.

For the first time, the Laws of Trade and Navigation which had been ignored for years were enforced. King's ships were turned into revenue cutters which began to poke into every little bay and to intercept smuggling vessels. Cargoes and ships were confiscated to the loss of eminent merchants like John Hancock. Customs officers found to be in the pay of the smugglers were dismissed and loyal ones were backed up with squads of soldiers. Revenues of the government increased but not as fast as the resentment of the people.

Indignation, high everywhere, was brought to fever pitch by new laws enacted in 1764 and 1765. The Sugar Act was the first blow. For the first time, Parliament attempted to levy an "internal tax" for the stated purpose of raising revenue for the crown. The colonists made a careful distinction between internal and external taxes. An internal tax was levied directly on the citizen as a per capita or ad valorem tax, usually, and in the colonial view was legal only if passed by a colonial legislature. Parliament was conceded the right to levy external taxes by passing duties on exports from England which were sold to the colonies. Under the mercantilist system, such taxes were acceptable ways of regulating trade. The Americans were almost unanimously agreed in denying parliament the right to levy "internal" taxes; and they considered the Sugar Act to be primarily an attempt on the part of Parliament to assert its right to pass such taxes. This was exactly what the Grenville government, urged on by the king, was trying to do.

Although many historians have pictured him as a tyrant and a maniac, George III was, in fact, a person of considerable ability. He was extremely hardworking and devoted to England. He was, however, stubborn to a fault and ever sensitive to objections to his policies. His predecessors had never stopped being petty German princes, more concerned with their principalities than with ruling England. George III was determined to be the king of England and if he could not rule in despite of Parliament, he intended to rule through Parliament. He became a skilled politician. He hand-picked his Prime Ministers, and he budgeted 152,000 annually from his .

personal revenues for bribes and gratuities to influence votes in Parliament. The outcry from the colonies, their objections to laws passed in Parliament, and their petitions to the crown seemed to him to be personal affronts and threats to his right to rule. If the colonies succeeded in thwarting him, others might be tempted to try.

The Sugar Act caused an almost spontaneous boycott of sugar because the colonists refused to pay the tax. Sugar was not the widely used commodity that it is now, and many people were not directly affected in their pocketbooks.

The Sugar Act was followed in 1765 by the infamous Stamp Act and the ground swell of opposition to this law made the opposition to the Sugar Act appear as nothing. A stamp law had been in effect in England for years and was a very effective source of revenue. The stamps were expensive. All legal documents had to bear these revenue stamps in varying amounts. Not only deeds, mortgages, contracts had to have stamps, but also wills, marriage licenses, and college diplomas. Any citizen engaged in any formal transaction had to buy stamps.

The Stamp Act more than any other thing united the colonies. From Massachusetts to Georgia, rallies were held, speeches were made, sermons were preached in church, and papers with titles like "Oppression and Tyranny" were written by college students who couldn't graduate without a stamped diploma. It is said that young girls renounced suitors who would not join the opposition to stamps and married women turned their husbands out of bed if they lacked fervor in their hatred of stamps.



King George and his ministers were hung in effigy and angry mobs in almost every city and town forced the local stamp agents to resign their offices and burn their stamps.

Responding to a call from the Massachusetts legislature, nine colonies sent representatives to a congress held in New York to coordinate opposition to the stamps and to present a joint petition to the king for redress of their grievances. In order to make their stand more meaningful to Parliament, the Congress instigated another boycott of British goods. Nine hundred merchants in all the colonies signed an agreement to import no British goods until the act should be repealed.

In a little over a year, English exports to the colonies fell by more than fifty per cent. Cries of English merchants were filling the ears of Parliament. The Grenville government had fallen by this time for reasons unconnected with the stamps and had been replaced by one headed by the Marquis of Rockingham who was pro-American. In 1766, William Pitt moved that the Stamp Act be "repealed absolutely, totally, immediately." Off the statute book, it came but the damage it had done to English-American relations was never to be repaired. What is more, the Stamp Act Congress had passed showed Americans that they could work together. Differences which divided the colonies seemed to be less important than the interests they had in common.

Although Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, it passed at the same time a law called the Declaratory Act which said that Parliament still had the right to tax the colonies in

any way it chose. This act did not go unnoticed in the colonies.

In 1767, the fertile mind of a most unusual man named Charles Townshend was hatching plots for getting money from the colonies through taxes which they would accept. "Champagne Charlie" Townshend was Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1767 in a government led by Pitt. The Rockingham government had fallen, largely through the intrigues of the king and Pitt had been named Prime Minister. Pitt who had always been a friend of the colonies was only a shadow of his former greatness. He was sick in body and his mind was failing. Otherwise, it is impossible to understand how Pitt could have appointed Townshend to office. Townshend was handsome, witty, clever, and quite unprincipled. He had been on every side of every question in a long political career. In his early forties when he became Chancellor, he was to die in a few years, worn out prematurely from a life of excess.

Townshend had carefully noted the often repeated objections of the colonies to internal taxes and their acceptance of external taxes. The Townshend Acts which he steered through Parliament were a series of added duties on glass, paint, paper, lead, and tea, which the colonies imported in large quantities. He thought that these duties would be unchallenged by the colonies; and in one stroke, he would have established a precedent for Parliament's claim to the right to tax the colonies, and he would greatly increase the crown's revenues.

We know the outcome; more objections, more ill-will toward England, a successful boycott, outcry from English merchants, and, in 1770, repeal.

Between the colonial struggle and the pressure from George III, the Prime Ministership was chewing up politicians. Frederick, Lord North became Prime Minister in 1770. He was the personal choice of George III and was always in fear of displeasing the king. Yet he felt the necessity of repealing the Townshend Acts and of working out an accommodation with the colonies. Thus, he allowed the tax on tea to be retained when the Townshend Acts were repealed in order to satisfy the king that one tax remained in order to assert the right to tax. The king was delighted. He told Lord North that there "must always be one tax to keep up the right, and as such, I approve of the Tea Duty." Despite this fact and despite the Boston Massacre which occurred in March of 1770, North almost regained the good will of the colonies. For a period of almost three years, no new taxes were imposed and an era of good feeling was enjoyed.

In 1773, a great British institution was in trouble. The East India Company was almost bankrupt and was in need of a large loan from the Government to stay in business. This unique company was a joint venture of the British government and a number of private citizens. It was both a trading company and an instrument of British imperialism.

The commodity causing most of the trouble was tea. The crop was in surplus, and enormous quantities were piled in the company's warehouses along the Thames. The company had always been required by the government to bring its tea to

London where it was sold to wholesalers. The largest market for tea was the colonies and these wholesalers sold to other wholesalers in America who, in turn, sold to retailers. The mark-up of the original cost was quite large, after the tea passed through all these hands.

In 1773, the company had 17 million pounds of tea in their warehouses and no cash in the till. The government passed the Tea Act permitting the company to ship tea to the colonies where it could sell directly to retailers. A lower price could be offered to consumers at the expense of the middlemen. The lower price would stimulate consumption, sales would rise, and the company would be saved. The tea tax would generate revenue for the government, and the price, including tax, would still be less than the old price.

Surely the colonies could not object to paying a tax when the total cost, tax included, would be less than before.

The thunder this little tax on tea raised was deafening. It was the Stamp Act all over again. Merchants refused to stock tea and consumers refused to drink it. Ships carrying the tea were refused dock space and sent back to England. Where the ships did succeed in docking, as in Boston, the laborers on the wharves refused to unload it. In all parts of the country, "tea parties" were planned to intimidate the officers and crews of the tea ships, which had not yet left for England. No party was as large as the one held in Boston Harbor where, on the night of December 16, 1773, Sons of Liberty dressed as Indians heaved overboard 10,000 pounds worth of tea.

After the Boston Tea Party, events moved rapidly to a climax. (Rapidly, that is, considering the time required for trans-atlantic communication in those days.) Word of the affair reached London in March of 1774, and when he heard the news, King George was beside himself. Lord North was told in no uncertain terms that Parliament must punish the lawbreakers. Parliament was willing to oblige and this time the pro-American voices in the house were stilled. In short order four "coercive acts" were passed. The first was the Boston Port Bill which ordered the port closed to all incoming and outgoing traffic until the cost of the tea was paid. The next, the Massachusetts Government Act moved the capitol of the colony to Salem, strengthened the power of the royal governor and limited the authority of the colonial legislature. General Gage, the commander of the British forces in America happened to be home on leave when these first two acts were passed. He advised the king that at least four more regiments of soldiers would be needed to enforce them. Accordingly, Parliament passed the Quartering Act allowing the general to commandeer quarters for his men in the homes of the citizens. Finally, Parliament passed the Quebec Act granting French Canadians religious freedom and certain political advantages. This act was particularly galling to the Massachusetts puritans who were strongly anti-catholic and who continued to nourish a distaste for the Canadians because of the Indian wars. It was intended also to shift the economic center of the northeast from New England to Canada.

News of these acts reached Boston in May. General Gage and his soldiers did not arrive until several weeks later

with the official copies of the laws. During the intervening weeks, Sam Adams and other patriots had been very busy. Through the Committees of Correspondence which now existed in every colony, Adams spread the word about the coercive acts, or as the Bostonians called them, "The Intolerable Acts." He proposed another boycott, but the other colonies wanted a Continental Congress to consider all measures which might be taken. For the first time, people throughout the colonies were talking aloud about Independence.

Back in Boston, General Gage, now the royal governor, called the Massachusetts legislature into session to ratify the Intolerable Acts and vote payment for the tea. Instead, the legislature met behind locked doors and voted for delegates to the Continental Congress. Before the voting started, a loyalist member, pleading a call of nature, left the meeting long enough to tell the governor what was going on. Gage immediately drew up a proclamation dissolving the legislature and ordered an official to rush it to the state-house. But the official sped in vain. He read the message on the wrong side of a locked door while inside members went about instructing the delegates to the Congress.

The First Continental Congress met in late August 1774 at Philadelphia. Before they adjourned in October, the delegates had adopted Sam Adams' boycott; they had again petitioned the king, but more important, they voted to establish Committees of Safety in every county, town, and city. When the war came, these Committees were the means by which Congress raised an army.

This was an amazing performance, this acceptance of government by committee by a people that only fifteen years before had been suspicious rivals. Another remarkable thing about the American Revolution was its respect for law. Of course, the laws of Parliament were flouted, but only because the people thought them to be unconstitutional. The laws of Parliament which they rejected were replaced by laws enacted by their own representatives. Revolutionary rhetoric was usually taken with a grain of salt by these most indoctrinaire revolutionaries. The Sons of Liberty and the Stamp Act mobs were rapidly brought under the control of the laws of the Congress.

When the First Continental Congress adjourned, it was understood that if the king and Parliament acted unfavorably on their petitions, there would be a second Continental Congress the next year. When that Congress convened in April of 1775, blood had already been spilled at Lexington and Concord. The War had begun but the Revolution was over.