



“To divide, and thus to destroy”

LETTERS from a FARMER in PENNSYLVANIA

To the INHABITANTS of the BRITISH COLONIES

John Dickinson

LETTERS ONE & TWO, December 1767

In twelve essays widely read in colonial newspapers and soon printed as a pamphlet, John Dickinson urged firmer American resistance to Britain’s increased restrictions and bemoaned the complacency exhibited by Americans after the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766. Perhaps the hated stamp tax was history, but Parliament had passed new laws and begun to enforce existing laws that would become as reviled as the Stamp Act. First, in the Declaratory Act of 1766, Parliament affirmed its authority to legislate for the colonies and “bind the colonies and people of America . . . in all cases whatsoever.” A clear statement of who’s boss.

Then, with the Townshend Acts of 1767, Parliament placed “direct” taxes on specific British goods, a first in the commercial relationship between Britain and the American colonies. Finally, when the New York assembly failed to fully comply with Quartering Act of 1765, which required colonial authorities to house British troops in unoccupied buildings and furnish them with food and supplies, Parliament suspended the power of the assembly until it complied in full. (The Quartering Act is the prime reason for the Third Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.¹)

The son of a prominent Quaker family, John Dickinson (1732-1808) was born on his family’s tobacco plantation in Maryland. A lawyer and colonial legislator, he served in the First and Second Continental Congresses but refused to sign the Declaration of Independence because he believed the colonies were not ready to sever themselves from Great Britain. Nonetheless, he fought against the British as an officer in the Pennsylvania Militia and after the Revolution played a significant role in the life of the nation.

■ LETTER ONE. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 3, 1767.

Many Americans saw the demand to feed and house British soldiers as a tax upon the colonists, no less pernicious than the tax imposed by the Stamp Act. When the New York Assembly refused to comply fully with the Quartering Act (partly due to a budget shortfall), Parliament in effect dissolved the assembly until it would capitulate. In his first letter, Dickinson spells out the implications of the punishment Parliament visited upon New York. “If they [the people of New York] may be legally deprived . . . of the privilege of legislation, why may they not, with equal reason, be deprived of every other privilege?” Parliament, Dickinson argues, is attempting to compel the people of New York to submit to its will. He sees no difference between such legislative compulsion and the use of troops. Making his case with careful logic, he continually points out that what affects one colony affects all of them.

My dear COUNTRYMEN,

I am a *Farmer*, settled, after a variety of fortunes, near the banks of the river *Delaware* in the province [colony] of *Pennsylvania*. I received a liberal education, and have been engaged in the busy scenes of life, but am now convinced that a man may be as happy without bustle as with it. My farm is small; my servants are few and good; I have a little money at interest; I wish for no more; my employment in my own affairs is easy; and with a contented, grateful mind, undisturbed by worldly hopes or fears relating to myself, I am completing the number of days allotted to me by divine goodness.

BEING generally master of my time, I spend a good deal of it in a library, which I think the most valuable part of my small estate; and being acquainted with two or three gentlemen of abilities and

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¹ No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law. [U.S. Constitution, Third Amendment]

learning who honor me with their friendship, I have acquired, I believe, a greater knowledge in history and the laws and constitution of my country than is generally attained by men of my class, many of them not being so fortunate as I have been in the opportunities of getting information.

FROM my infancy I was taught to love *humanity* and *liberty*. Enquiry and experience have since confirmed my reverence for the lessons then given me, by convincing me more fully of their truth and excellence. Benevolence toward mankind excites wishes for their welfare, and such wishes endear the means of fulfilling them. *These* can be found in liberty only, and therefore her sacred cause ought to be espoused by every man, on every occasion, to the utmost of his power. As a charitable but poor person does not withhold his *mite*² because he cannot relieve *all* the distresses of the miserable, so should not any honest man suppress his sentiments concerning freedom, however small their influence is likely to be. Perhaps he “may touch some wheel”³ that will have an effect greater than he could reasonably expect.

THESE being my sentiments, I am encouraged to offer to you, my countrymen, my thoughts on some late [recent] transactions that appear to me to be of the utmost importance to you. Conscious of my defects, I have waited some time, in expectation of seeing the subject treated by persons much better qualified for the task; but being therein disappointed, and apprehensive that longer delays will be injurious, I venture at length to request the attention of the public, praying that these lines may be *read* with the same zeal for the happiness of *British* America with which they were *wrote*.

WITH a good deal of surprise I have observed that little notice has been taken of an act of Parliament as injurious in its principle to the liberties of these colonies as the *Stamp Act* was: I mean the act for suspending the legislation of *New York*.

THE assembly of that government complied with a former act of Parliament requiring certain provisions to be made for the troops in *America* in every particular, I think, except the articles of salt, *pepper* and vinegar. In my opinion they acted imprudently, considering all circumstances, in not complying so far as would have given satisfaction, as several colonies did. But my dislike of their conduct in that instance has not blinded me so much that I cannot plainly perceive that they have been punished in a manner pernicious to *American* freedom and justly alarming to all the colonies.

IF the *British* Parliament has a legal authority to issue an order that we shall furnish a single article for the troops here, and to compel obedience to *that* order, they have the same right to issue an order for us supply those troops with arms, clothes, and every necessary, and to compel obedience to *that* order also; in short, to lay *any burdens* they please upon us. What is this but *taxing* us at a *certain sum* and leaving us only the *manner* of raising it? How is this mode more tolerable than the *Stamp Act*? Would that act have appeared more pleasing to *Americans* if, being ordered thereby to raise the sum total of the taxes, the mighty privilege had been left to them of saying how much should be paid for an instrument of writing on paper, and how much for another on parchment?

AN act of Parliament commanding us to do a certain thing, if it has any validity, is a *tax* upon us for the expense that accrues in complying with it, and for this reason, I believe, every colony on the continent that chose to give a mark of their respect for *Great Britain*, in complying with the act relating to the troops, cautiously avoided the mention of that act, lest their conduct should be attributed to its supposed obligation.

THE matter being thus stated, the assembly of *New York* either had or had not a right to refuse submission to that act. If they had, and I imagine no *American* will say they had not, then the Parliament had *no right* to compel them to execute it. If they had not *this right*, they had *no right* to punish them for not executing it, and therefore *no right* to suspend their legislation, which is a punishment. In fact, if the people of *New York* cannot be legally taxed but by their own representatives, they cannot be legally

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² English coin of low monetary value, i.e., his small charitable contribution.

³ Alexander Pope (British poet), *Essay on Man*, 1732-1734, 1738, “So man, who here seems principal alone, / Perhaps acts second to some sphere unknown, / Touches some wheel, or verges to some goal; / 'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole.”

deprived of the privilege of legislation, only for insisting on that exclusive privilege of taxation. If they may be legally deprived in such a case of the privilege of legislation, why may they not, with equal reason, be deprived of every other privilege? Or why may not every colony be treated in the same manner, when any of them shall dare to deny their assent to any impositions that shall be directed? Or what signifies the repeal of the *Stamp Act* if these colonies are to lose their *other* privileges by not tamely surrendering *that* of taxation?

THERE is one consideration arising from this suspension, which is not generally attended to, but shows its importance very clearly. It was not *necessary* that this suspension should be caused by an act of Parliament. The Crown might have restrained the governor of *New York* even from calling the assembly together, by its prerogative in the royal governments. This step, I suppose, would have been taken if the conduct of the assembly of *New York* had been regarded as an act of disobedience *to the Crown alone*; but it is regarded as an act of “disobedience to the authority of the BRITISH LEGISLATURE.” This gives the suspension a consequence vastly more affecting. It is a parliamentary assertion of the *supreme authority* of the *British* legislature over these colonies in *the point of taxation*, and is intended to COMPEL *New York* into a submission to that authority. It seems therefore to me as much a violation of the liberties of the people of that province, and consequently of all these colonies, as if the Parliament had sent a number of regiments to be quartered upon them, till they should comply. For it is evident that the suspension meant as a *compulsion*, and the *method* of compelling is totally indifferent. It is indeed probable that the sight of red coats and the hearing of drums would have been most alarming, because people are generally more influenced by their eyes and ears than by their reason. But whoever seriously considers the matter must perceive that a dreadful stroke is aimed at the liberty of these colonies. I say, of these colonies, for the cause of *one* is the cause of *all*. If the Parliament may lawfully deprive *New York* of any of *her* rights, it may deprive any or all the other colonies of *their* rights; and nothing can possibly so much encourage such attempts as a mutual inattention to the interests of each other. *To divide, and thus to destroy*, is the first political maxim in attacking those who are powerful by their union. He certainly is not a wise man who folds his arms and reposes himself at home, viewing with unconcern the flames that have invaded his neighbor’s house, without using any endeavors to extinguish them. When Mr. *Hampden*’s ship-money case for *Three Shillings and Four-pence* was tried, all the people of *England*, with anxious expectation, interested themselves in the important decision; and when the slightest point touching the freedom of one colony is agitated, I earnestly wish that *all the rest* may with equal ardor support their sister. Very much may be said on this subject, but I hope more at present is unnecessary.

WITH concern I have observed that *two* assemblies of this province have sat and adjourned without taking any notice of this act. It may perhaps be asked: what would have been proper for them to do? I am by no means fond of inflammatory measures; I detest them. I should be sorry that anything should be done which might justly displease our sovereign or our mother country: But a firm, modest exertion of a free spirit should never be wanting [lacking] on public occasions. It appears to me that it would have been sufficient for the assembly to have ordered our agents to represent to the King’s ministers their sense of the suspending act and to pray [petition] for its repeal. Thus we should have borne our testimony against it, and might therefore reasonably expect that, on a like occasion, we might receive the same assistance from the other colonies.

Concordia res parvae crescunt.
Small things grow great by concord.

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A FARMER

■ LETTER TWO. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 10, 1767. EXCERPTS.

In twelve essays widely read in colonial newspapers in 1767 and 1768 and soon printed as a pamphlet, John Dickinson makes a case for American resistance to Britain's attempt to increase its control over the colonies. In his second letter, Dickinson acknowledges that the colonies are part of the British Empire and that Great Britain has authority over them. Every law passed by Parliament relating to the colonies, including the imposition of taxes, has been based upon its authority to regulate trade—every law, that is, except the Stamp Act, which was passed simply to raise revenue. For Dickinson, this distinction is critical: Parliament can legitimately tax the colonies to regulate trade but not to raise revenue. The import taxes (duties) imposed by the Townshend Act would be legitimate, he maintains, if they were meant to regulate trade. But because Parliament requires the colonists to buy the taxed goods—paper, paint, glass, and tea—from Britain alone, there is no competition, no trade, to regulate. Thus the duties are designed solely to raise revenues and are therefore unjust. Can the colonists evade them by switching to domestic substitutes? No, because America makes very little glass and paper. Moreover, since Britain can prohibit manufacturing in America—she has already outlawed the production of iron and steel—she might simply prohibit more and more manufacturing, forcing the colonists to rely more and more on imported British goods, which she will tax more and more. America is “a city besieged,” he concludes, and Americans are threatened with slavery.

My dear COUNTRYMEN,

THERE is another late [recent] act of Parliament which appears to me to be unconstitutional and as destructive to the liberty of these colonies as that mentioned in my last letter; that is, the act⁴ for granting the duties [import taxes] on paper, glass, &c. [etc.]

THE Parliament unquestionably possesses a legal authority to *regulate* the trade of *Great Britain* and all her colonies. Such an authority is essential to the relation between a mother country and her colonies, and necessary for the common good of all. He who considers these provinces as states distinct from the *British Empire* has very slender notions of *justice* or of their *interests*. We are but parts of a *whole*, and therefore there must exist a power somewhere to preside and preserve the connection in due order. This power is lodged in the Parliament, and we are as much dependent on *Great Britain* as a perfectly free people can be on another.

I HAVE looked over *every statute* relating to these colonies, from their first settlement to this time, and I find every one of them founded on this principle, till the *Stamp Act* administration.⁵ *All before* are calculated to regulate trade and preserve or promote a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire; and though many of them imposed duties on trade, yet those duties were always imposed *with design* to restrain the commerce of one part that was injurious to another, and thus to promote the general welfare. The raising of a revenue thereby was never intended. Thus the King, by his judges in his courts of justice, imposes fines, which all together amount to a very considerable sum and contribute to the support of government: But this is merely a consequence arising from restrictions that only meant to keep peace and prevent confusion; and surely a man would argue very loosely who should conclude from hence that the King has a right to levy money in general upon his subjects. Never did the *British Parliament*, till the period

above mentioned, think of imposing duties in *America* FOR THE PURPOSE OF RAISING A REVENUE. . . .

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A FEW months after came the *Stamp Act*, which reciting this, proceeds in the same strange mode of expression, thus — “And whereas it is just and necessary that provision be made for RAISING A FURTHER REVENUE WITHIN YOUR MAJESTY’S DOMINIONS IN AMERICA, *towards defraying the said expenses*, we your Majesty’s most dutiful and loyal subjects, the COMMONS OF GREAT BRITAIN, &c. GIVE and GRANT,” &c. as before.

THE last act, granting duties upon paper, &c. carefully pursues these modern precedents. The preamble is “Whereas it is expedient THAT A REVENUE SHOULD BE RAISED IN YOUR MAJESTY’S DOMINIONS IN AMERICA, *for making a more certain and adequate provision for defraying the charge of the administration of justice, and the support of civil government in such provinces where it shall be*

⁴ Revenue Act of 1767.

⁵ Dickinson provides an extensive list (not included here) of the “former acts of Parliament relating to these colonies” in order to emphasize “their great different in *expression and intention*” to the Revenue Act.

found necessary, and towards the further defraying the expenses of defending, protecting and securing the said dominions, we your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the COMMONS OF GREAT BRITAIN, &c. GIVE and GRANT," &c. as before.

HERE we may observe an authority *expressly* claimed and exerted to impose duties on these colonies, not for the regulation of trade, not for the preservation or promotion of a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire, heretofore the *sole objects* of parliamentary institutions, *but for the single purpose of levying money upon us.*

THIS I call an innovation,* and a most dangerous innovation. It may perhaps be objected that *Great Britain* has a right to lay what duties she pleases upon her exports,† and it makes no difference to us whether they are paid here or there. TO this I answer. These colonies require many things for their use, which the laws of *Great Britain* prohibit them from getting anywhere but from her. Such are paper and glass.

THAT we may legally be bound to pay any *general* duties on these commodities, relative to the regulation of trade, is granted; but we being *obliged by her laws* to take them from *Great Britain*, any *special* duties imposed on their exportation *to us only, with intention to raise a revenue from us only*, are as much *taxes* upon us, as those imposed by the *Stamp Act*. . . .

SOME persons perhaps may say that this act lays us under no necessity to pay the duties imposed because we may ourselves manufacture the articles on which they are laid, whereas by the *Stamp Act* no instrument of writing could be good unless made on *British* paper, and that too stamped.

SUCH an objection amounts to no more than this, that the injury resulting to these colonies from the total disuse of *British* paper and glass will not be *so afflicting* as that which would have resulted from the total disuse of writing among them; for by that means even the *Stamp Act* might have been eluded. Why then was it universally detested by them as slavery itself? Because it presented to these devoted provinces nothing but a choice of calamities* embittered by indignities, each of which it was unworthy of free men to bear. But is no injury a violation of right but the *greatest* injury? If the eluding the payment of the taxes imposed by the *Stamp Act* would have subjected us to a more dreadful inconvenience than the eluding of the payment of those imposed by the late act, does it therefore follow that the last is *no violation* of our rights, tho' it is calculated for the same purpose the other was, that is, to *raise money upon us*, WITHOUT OUR CONSENT?

THIS would be making *right* to consist, not in an exemption from *injury*, but from a certain *degree of injury*.

BUT the objectors may further say that we shall suffer no injury at all by the disuse of *British* paper and glass. We might not, if we could make as much as we want. But can any man, acquainted with *America*, believe this possible? I am told there are but two or three *Glass-Houses* on this continent and but very few *Paper-Mills*; and suppose more should be erected, a long course of years must elapse before they can be brought to perfection. This continent is a country of planters, farmers, and fishermen, not of manufacturers. The difficulty of establishing particular manufactures in such a country is almost insuperable. For one manufacture is connected with others in such a manner that it may be said to be impossible to establish one or two without establishing several others. The experience of many nations may convince us of this truth.

INEXPRESSIBLE therefore must be our distresses in evading the late acts by the disuse of *British* paper and glass. Nor will this be the extent of our misfortune, if we admit the legality of that act.

GREAT BRITAIN has prohibited the manufacturing *iron* and *steel* in these colonies, without any objection being made to her *right* of doing it. The *like* right she must have to prohibit any other manufacture among us. Thus she is possessed of an undisputed *precedent* on that point. This authority,

* "It is [a] worthy observation how quietly subsidies, granted in forms *usual* and *accustomable* (though heavy) are borne; such a power hath use and custom. On the other side, what discontentments and disturbances subsidies *framed in a new mold* do raise (SUCH AN INBRED HATRED NOVELTY DOTH HATCH) is evident by examples of former times." Lord Coke's 2d Institute, p. 33. [Dickinson footnote]

† Some people think that *Great Britain* has the same right to impose duties on the exports to these colonies, as on the exports to *Spain* and *Portugal*, etc. Such persons attend so much to the idea of exportation, that they entirely drop *that of the connection between the mother country and her colonies*. If *Great Britain* had always claimed, and exercised an authority to compel *Spain* and *Portugal* to import manufactures from her only, the cases would be parallel: But as she never pretended to such a right, they are at liberty to get them where they please; and if they choose to take them from her, rather than from other nations, they voluntarily consent to pay the duties imposed on them. [Dickinson footnote]

* Either the *disuse* of writing or the payment of *taxes* imposed by others *without our consent*. [Dickinson footnote]

she will say, is founded on the *original intention* of settling these colonies, that is, that she should manufacture for them, and that they should supply her with materials. The *equity* of this policy, she will also say, has been universally acknowledged by the colonies, who never have made the least objection to statutes for that purpose, and will further appear by the *mutual benefits* flowing from this usage, ever since the settlement of these colonies.

OUR great advocate, Mr. *Pitt*,⁶ in his speeches on the debate concerning the repeal of the *Stamp Act*, acknowledged that *Great Britain* could restrain our manufactures. His words are these — “This kingdom, as the supreme governing and legislative power, has ALWAYS bound the colonies by her regulations and RESTRICTIONS in trade, in navigation, in MANUFACTURES — in everything *except that of taking their money out of their pockets* WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT.” Again he says, “We may bind their trade, CONFINE THEIR MANUFACTURES, and exercise every power whatever, *except that of taking their money out of their pockets* WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT.”

HERE then, my dear countrymen, ROUSE yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over your heads. If you O N C E admit that *Great Britain* may lay duties upon her exportations to us, *for the purpose of levying money on us only*, she then will have nothing to do but to lay those duties on the articles which she prohibits us to manufacture — and the tragedy of *American* liberty is finished. We have been prohibited from procuring manufactures, in all cases, anywhere but from *Great Britain* (excepting linens, which we are permitted to import directly from *Ireland*). We have been prohibited, in some cases, from manufacturing for ourselves, and may be prohibited in others. We are therefore exactly in the situation of a city besieged, which is surrounded by the works of the besiegers in every part *but one*. If *that* is closed up, no step can be taken *but to surrender at discretion*. If *Great Britain* can order us to come to her for necessaries we want, and can order us to pay what taxes she pleases before we take them away, or when we land them here, we are as abject slaves as *France* and *Poland* can show in wooden shoes and with uncombed hair.*

**HERE then,
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countrymen,
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and behold the ruin
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PERHAPS the nature of the *necessities* of dependent states, caused by the policy of a governing one for her own benefit, may be elucidated by a fact mentioned in history. When the *Carthaginians* were possessed of the island of *Sardinia*, they made a decree that the *Sardinians* should not raise *corn*, nor get it any other way than from the *Carthaginians*. Then, by imposing any duties they would upon it, they drained from the miserable *Sardinians* any sums they pleased; and whenever that oppressed people made the least movement to assert their liberty, their tyrants starved them to death or submission. This may be called the most perfect kind of political necessity.

FROM what has been said, I think this uncontrovertible conclusion may be deduced, that when a ruling state obliges a dependent state to take certain commodities from her alone, it is implied in the nature of that obligation, is essentially requisite to give it the least degree of justice, and is inseparably united with it, in order to preserve any share of freedom to the dependent state; *that those commodities should never be loaded with duties*, FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF LEVYING MONEY ON THE DEPENDENT STATE.

UPON the whole, the single question is whether the Parliament can legally impose duties to be paid *by the people of these colonies only*, FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF RAISING A REVENUE, *on commodities which she obliges us to take from her alone*, or, in other words, whether the Parliament can legally take money out of our pockets without our consent. If they can, our boasted liberty is but

Vox et praeterea nihil.
A sound and nothing else.

A F A R M E R

⁶ William Pitt the Elder (1708–1778), prime minister of Britain during the French and Indian War, supported the repeal of the Stamp Act.

* The peasants of *France* wear wooden shoes, and the vassals of *Poland* are remarkable for matted hair, which never can be combed. [Dickinson footnote]