

## NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

deserter reach the British to "Death without Benefit of Clergy." Peter Wilson, comp., *Acts of the Council and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey* (Trenton, 1784), Chap. CCXVIII.

### 5 Governor William Livingston, Speech to the Legislature on the State of the State

[*Votes and Proceedings, August 27, 1776-June 7, 1777* (Burlington, 1777), pp. 85-89.]

On December 23, 1776, Thomas Paine, who eleven months earlier had issued his famous pamphlet *Common Sense*, began the first of his *Crisis* essays with the observation that "These are the times that try men's souls." Indeed they were, for the winter of 1776-1777 saw public morale in New Jersey reach its nadir. The British had overrun the state in December, citizens had flocked to join the invaders, and the legislature had fled from Princeton to Trenton to Burlington and then disbanded. Although Washington's army had liberated West Jersey in January, the General Assembly regrouped in February at the small Gloucester County hamlet of Haddonfield in an atmosphere of foreboding. In the address below, directed to the general public as well as the legislators, Livingston sought to rally support for both the state government and the Continental army encamped at Morristown. The tone and quality of the remarks are characteristic of his future public speeches and the newspaper essays he published under the pseudonym "Hortentius." Eloquent and exaggerated, intemperate and emotional, his speech, coupling outrage at British depredations with a firm belief in the inevitable success of the American quest, was a calculated effort to transform summer soldiers and sunshine patriots into active defenders of the new state and nation.

Haddonfield, Feb. 25, 1777<sup>1</sup>

Gentlemen,

Having already laid before the Assembly, by Messages, the several Matters that have occurred to me, as more particularly demanding their Attention, during the present Session; it may seem less necessary to address you, in the more ceremonious Form of a Speech. But conceiving it my Duty to the State, to deliver my Sentiments on the present Situation of Affairs; and the eventful Contest between Great-Britain and America; which could not, with any Propriety, be conveyed in occasional Messages; you will excuse my giving you the Trouble of attending for that Purpose.

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After deploring with you the Desolation spread through Part of this State, by an unrelenting Enemy, who have indeed marked their Progress, with a Devastation unknown to civilized Nations; and evincive of the most implacable Vengeance; I heartily congratulate you on that subsequent Series of Success, wherewith it hath pleased the Almighty to crown the American Arms; and particularly on the important Enterprize against the Enemy at Trenton; and the signal Victory obtained over them at Princeton, by the gallant Troops under the Command of His Excellency General Washington.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the contemptible Figure they make at present; and the Disgust they have given to many of their own Confederates amongst us, by their more than Gothic Ravages; (for thus doth the Great Disposer of Events often deduce good out of Evil) their Irruption into our Dominion, will probably redound to the publick Benefit. It has certainly enabled us the more effectually to distinguish our Friends from our Enemies. It has winnowed the Chaff from the Grain. It has discriminated the temporizing Politician, who on the first Appearance of Danger, was determined to secure his Idol, Property, at the Hazard of the general Weal; from the persevering Patriot, who having embarked his All in the common Cause, chooses rather to risque, rather to lose that All for the Preservation of the more estimable Treasure, LIBERTY; than to possess it (enjoy it he could not) upon the ignominious Terms of tamely resigning his Country and Posterity to perpetual Servitude. It has, in a Word, opened the Eyes of those, who were made to believe, that their impious Merit in abetting our Persecutors, would exempt them from being involved in the common Calamity. But as the Rapacity of the Enemy was boundless; their Rapine was indiscriminate, and their Barbarity unparallelled. They have plundered Friends and Foes. Effects capable of Division they have divided. Such as were not, they have destroyed. They have warred upon decrepid Age; warred upon defenceless Youth. They have committed Hostilities against the Possessors of Literature; and the Ministers of Religion: Against publick Records and private Muniments; and Books of Improvement; and Papers of Curiosity; and against the Arts and Sciences. They have butchered the wounded asking for Quarter; mangled the dying weltering in their Blood; refused to the Dead the Rites of Sepulture; suffered Prisoners to perish for Want of Sustenance; violated the Chastity of Women; disfigured private Dwellings of Taste and Elegance; and in the Rage of Impiety and Barbarism, profaned Edifices dedicated to Almighty God.

And yet there are amongst us, who, either from ambitious or lucrative Motives, or intimidated by the Terror of their Arms; or from a partial Fondness for the British Constitution; or deluded by insidious Propositions, are secretly abetting, or openly aiding their Machinations to deprive us of that Liberty, without which, Man is a Beast, and Government a Curse.

Besides the inexpressible Baseness of wishing to rise on the Ruins of our Country; or to acquire Riches at the Expencc of the Liberties and Fortunes of Millions of our Fellow-Citizens; how soon would those delusive Dreams upon the Conquest of America, be turned into Disappointment? For where is the Fund to recompence those Retainers of the British Army;<sup>3</sup> those intentional Pensioners of a Bankrupt Nation? Was every Estate in America to be confiscated, and converted into Cash; the Product would not satiate the Avidity of their own Creatures; nor furnish an adequate Repast for the keen Appetites of their own ministerial Beneficiaries. Instead of Gratuities and Promotion, these unhappy Accomplices in their

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Tyranny, would meet with supercilious Looks and cold Disdain; and after tedious Attendance, be finally told by their haughty Masters, that they indeed approved of the Treason, but despised the Traitor. Insulted, in fine, by their pretended Protectors but real Betrayers; and goaded with the Stings of their own Consciences, they would remain the frightful Monuments of human Contempt, and divine Indignation, and linger out the Rest of their Days in Self-Condernation and Remorse; and in weeping over the Ruins of their Country, which themselves had been instrumental in reducing to Desolation and Bondage.

Others there are, who, terrified at the Power of Britain, have persuaded themselves that she is not only formidable, but irresistible. That her power is great, is beyond Question. That it is not to be despised, the Dictate of common Prudence. But then we ought also to consider her, as weak in Council, and groaning with Debt: Reduced in her Trade; reduced in her Revenue: Immersed in Pleasure; enervated with Luxury; and in Dissipation and Venality surpassing all Europe. We ought to consider her as hated by a potent Rival her natural Enemy; and particularly exasperated at her imperious Conduct in the last War, as well as her provoking Manner of commencing it:<sup>4</sup> And thence inflamed with Resentment, and only watching a favourable Juncture for open Hostilities. We ought to consider the amazing Expence and Difficulty of transporting Troops and Provisions, above three Thousand Miles; with the Impossibility of recruiting their Army at a less Distance, save only with such Recreants, whose conscious Guilt, must, on the first Approach of Danger, appal the stoutest Heart. These insuperable Obstacles, are known and acknowledged by every virtuous and impartial Man in the Nation. Even the Author<sup>5</sup> of this horrid War, is incapable of concealing his own Confusion and Distress. Too great to be wholly suppressed, it frequently discovers itself in the Course of his Speech. A Speech terrible in Word; and fraught with Contradiction: Breathing Threatenings; and betraying Terror: A motley Mixture of Magnanimity and Consternation; of Grandeur and Abasement. With Troops invincible, he dreads a Defeat; and wants Reinforcements. Victorious in America, and triumphant on the Ocean, he is an humble Dependent on a petty Prince; and apprehends an Attack upon his own Metropolis: And with full Confidence in the Friendship and Alliance of France, he trembles upon his Throne, at her secret Designs, and open Preparations.

With all this, we ought to contrast the numerous and hardy Sons of America, enured to Toil; seasoned alike to Heat and Cold; hale; robust; patient of Fatigue; and from an ardent Love of Liberty, ready to face Danger and Death. The immense Extent of Continent which our infatuated Enemies have undertaken to subjugate. The remarkable Unanimity of its Inhabitants, notwithstanding the Exception of a few Apostates and Deserters. Their unshaken Resolution to maintain their Freedom, or perish in the Attempt. The Fertility of our Soil, in all Kinds of Provisions, necessary for the Support of War. Our inexhaustible internal Resources for Military Stores and Naval Armaments. Our comparative Oeconomy in publick Expence; and the Millions we save, by reprobating the farther Exchange of our valuable Staples, for the worthless Baubles and Finery, of English Manufacture. Add to this, that in a Cause so just and righteous on our Part, we have the highest Reason to expect the Blessing of Heaven, upon our glorious Conflict. For who can doubt the Interposition of the SUPREME JUST, in Favour of a People forced to occur to Arms, in Defence of every Thing dear and precious; against a Nation deaf to our Complaints,

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rejoicing in our Misery, wantonly aggravating our Oppressions; determined to divide our Substance; and by Fire and Sword to compel us into Submission?

Respecting the Constitution of Great-Britain, bating certain Prerogatives of dangerous Tendency, it has indeed been applauded by the best Judges; and displays in its Original Structure, illustrious Proofs of Wisdom; and the Knowledge of Mankind. But what avails the best Constitution with the worst Administration? For what is their present Government—and what has it been for Years past, but a pensioned Confederacy against Reason, and Virtue, and Honour, and Patriotism, and the Rights of Man? What their Governors but a set of political Craftsmen flagiciously conspiring to erect the Bable [of] DESPOTISM, on the Ruins of the ancient and beautiful Fabric of LAW? A shameless Cabal notoriously employed in deceiving the Prince; corrupting the Parliament; debasing the People; depressing the most virtuous; and exalting the most profligate! In short, an insatiable Junto of publick Spoilers, lavishing the national Wealth; and by Peculation and Plunder, daily accumulating a Debt already enormous! And what the Majority of their Parliament, formerly the most august Assembly in the World, but venal Pensioners on the Crown; a perfect Mockery of all Representation; and at the absolute Devotion of every Minister? What were the Characteristicks of their Administration of the Provinces? The Substitution of Instructions in the Room of Law; The Multiplication of Officers to strengthen the Court-Interest: Perpetually extending the Prerogatives of the King; and retrenching the Rights of the Subject: Advancing to the most eminent Stations, Men without Education, and of dissolute Manners: Employing with the Peoples Money a Band of Emissaries to misrepresent and traduce the People. And (to crown the System of Mis-rule) sporting with our Persons and Estates, by filling the highest Seats of Justice with Bankrupts, Bullies and Block-heads.

From such a Nation, (though all this we bore, and should probably have borne for a Century, had they not avowedly claimed the unconditional Disposal of Life and Property) it is evidently our Duty to be detached. To remain happy or safe in our Connection with her, became thenceforth utterly impossible. She is, moreover, precipitating her own Fall; or the Age of Miracles is returned; and Britain a Phaenomenon in the political World without a Parallel.

The Proclamations to ensnare the timid and credulous, are beyond Expression disingenuous and tantalizing.<sup>6</sup> In a gilded Pill, they conceal real Poison. They add Insult to Injury. After repeated Intimations of Commissioners to treat with America, we are presented, instead of the peaceful Olive-Branch, with the devouring Sword. Instead of being visited by Plenipotentiaries to bring Matters to an Accommodation; we are invaded with an Army, in their Opinion, able to subdue us; and upon discovering their Error, the Terms propounded amount to this, "If you will submit without Resistance, we are content to take your Property, and spare your lives; and then (the Consummation of Arrogance!) we will graciously pardon you, for having hitherto defended both."

Considering then, their bewildered Councils; their blundering Ministry; their Want of Men and Money; their impaired Credit, and declining Commerce; their lost Revenues, and starving Islands; the Corruption of their Parliament, with the Effeminacy of the Nation—and the Success of their Enterprize is against all Probability. Considering farther the horrid Enormity of their waging War against their own Brethren, expostulating for an Audience, complaining of Injuries and

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supplicating for Redress; and waging it with a Ferocity and Vengeance unknown to modern Ages, and contrary to all Laws human and divine, and we can neither Question the Justice of our Opposition, nor the Assistance of Heaven to crown it with Victory.

Let us however, not presumptuously rely on the Interposition of Providence without exerting those Efforts, which it is our Duty to exert; and which our bountiful Creator has enabled us to exert. Let us do our Part to open the next Campaign with redoubled Vigour; and until the United States have humbled the Pride of Britain, and obtained an honourable Peace, cheerfully furnish our Proportion for continuing the War: A War, on our Side, founded on the immutable Obligation of Self-Defence; and in Support of Freedom, of Virtue, and every Thing tending to ennoble our Nature, and render a People happy. On their Part, prompted by boundless Avarice; and a Thirst for absolute Sway; and built on a Claim repugnant to every Principle of Reason and Equity: A Claim subversive of all Liberty, natural, civil, moral, and religious; incompatible with human Happiness, and usurping the Attributes of Deity; degrading Man, and blaspheming God.

Let us all, therefore, of every Rank and Degree, remember our plighted Faith and Honour, to maintain the Cause with our Lives and Fortunes. Let us inflexibly persevere in prosecuting to a happy Period, what has been so gloriously begun, and hitherto so prosperously conducted. And let those in more distinguished Stations, use all their Influence and Authority, to rouse the supine; to animate the irresolute; to confirm the wavering; and to draw from his lurking Hole the skulking Neutral, who, leaving to others the Heat and Burden of the Day, means in the final Result, to reap the Fruits of that Victory, for which he will not contend. Let us be peculiarly assiduous in bringing to condign Punishment, those detestable Parricides, who have been openly active against their native Country. And may we, in all our Deliberations and Proceedings, be influenced and directed by the great Arbiter of the Fate of Nations, by whom Empires rise and fall; and who will not always suffer, *the Sceptre of the Wicked, to rest on the Lot of the Righteous*; but in due Time avenge an injured People, on their unfeeling Oppressor, and his bloody Instruments.

1. The speech is dated February 25, but was delivered to the legislature on the twenty-eighth. It was subsequently printed as a four-page pamphlet for public distribution.
2. See Sec. IX, Docs. 2 and 3.
3. German mercenaries.
4. The references are to France and the French and Indian War of 1754-1763.
5. George III.
6. General Howe's proclamation of November 30 offering pardons in exchange for oaths of allegiance. See Docs. 2 and 3.