

XIII THE SPIRIT OF '76

the *Gazette*. In a message to the assembly on October 11, 1777, Governor William Livingston noted the benefits that would derive from having a newspaper in the state and proposed that the legislature provide the necessary financial encouragement to launch such a venture. On November 5, a committee was appointed to confer with Collins—who was then the state printer charged with publishing statutes, legislative records, and other official documents—“concerning the Terms on which he will undertake to print and circulate” a newspaper. Apparently an agreement has been worked out in advance by Livingston and Collins, for that same day the Trenton printer agreed to commence publication if the government would subsidize an express rider from his shop to the nearest post office and underwrite 700 subscriptions until a like number of private subscribers could be obtained. The assemblymen, each of whom took out a subscription, promptly authorized the requisite appropriations. They obviously concurred wholeheartedly with the committee’s recommendation that “a well-conducted Gazette” would not only “greatly tend to promote useful Knowledge and Arts in the State” but also “by setting publick Events and Transactions in a true Point of View” would be a “Means of defeating [the] mischievous Designs” of the British who circulated false publications and rumors “purposely calculated to abuse and mislead the People.” *Votes and Proceedings, August 23-October 11, 1777* (Trenton, 1777), pp. 202-3; *Ibid., October 28, 1777-October 8, 1778* (Trenton, 1778), pp. 8-9.

2 “Cato” on the Characteristics of Representatives

[*New-Jersey Gazette*; January 7, 1778.]

The republican experiment in self-government made far more exacting demands of members of the legislature than had been imposed upon their colonial counterparts. In the first place, the state constitution of 1776 (see Sec. VII, Doc. 6) provided for annual elections instead of indefinite tenure. (Prior to the Revolution councilmen sat at the pleasure of the crown, while assemblymen served until the governor called for new elections.) Moreover, the effective operation of republican government required that the people be able to effectuate their will through elected representatives. Thus the legislators had to be men of virtue—that is, they must act in behalf of the common good rather than a particular constituency, class, or vested interest group, and be willing to subordinate personal considerations to the performance of their duties. In short, members of the legislature were to be public servants in the best sense of the term. Not surprisingly, they were extremely sensitive to public opinion and constituent concerns; conversely, citizens were quick to make their views known to their representatives through petitions and public writings. In the piece that follows, “Cato” offers for the benefit of the members of the lower house of

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the legislature—and by extension all public officials—a classic statement of the republican concept of the characteristics of good rulers.

[January 7, 1778]

Sir,

Though I am an old man that cannot render my country any active services, I am willing to contribute my mite to its prosperity, in the only way in which I can be useful to it. Having lost that vigour and vivacity which is peculiar to youth, and necessary for the more busy scenes of life, I am retired from the bustle of the world, resolved to spend the remainder of my days, not as an idle spectator of the struggle in which we are engaged, but with a resolution of conveying to the public, through the channel of your paper, such hints and observations on our internal police,¹ as I think may be salutary to the cause of liberty and virtue.

We have, by the blessing of Providence, established a glorious fabric of freedom and independence; but unless that fabric is supported by the same spirit of patriotism by which it was reared, I am afraid that it will not be of long duration. Whenever our public virtue decays, our government, which owes its origin to and was founded upon public virtue, will languish; and upon the total extinction of the former, (which heaven avert from ever proving our case) the latter will crumble to pieces, and be totally demolished. It requires great virtue in the people, and great wisdom and activity in their rulers, to prevent the constitution from degenerating in anarchy and confusion. I shall therefore, from time to time publish my sentiments, as well on the errors of the people over us, either as legislators or magistrates, and that with the freedom becoming a subject of a free government, but at the same time with the deference and decorum due to superiors. For the present be pleased to insert my thoughts on the duty of representatives, which are honestly meant, and I hope will be graciously received.

Characteristics of a good Assembly-Man.

I. To accept his delegation with a sincere desire, and for the sole purpose of rendering his country all the service in his power.

II. Seriously to consider what laws will be most beneficial; industrious in collecting materials for framing them; and prompt to hear all men, especially the most judicious, on the state of his country; and the regulations proposed to render it more happy and flourishing.

III. To make conscience of doing his proper share of business in the House, without leaving it to others to do his part, by which they must necessarily neglect their own; every member being bound in honour to do as much as he can.

IV. Candidly and impartially to form his own judgment for himself, yet to be always open to conviction; and upon proper arguments for that purpose, ready to change, and frankly to confess the change of, his sentiments.

V. To detach himself from all local partialities, and county-interests, inconsistent with the common weal; and ever considering himself as a representative of the whole State, to be assiduous in promoting the interest of the whole, which must ultimately produce the good of every part.

VI. Never to grudge the time he spends in attending the sessions, tho' his private affairs may suffer, since the loss he may thereby sustain will be amply recompensed by the delightful testimony of his conscience, in favour of his

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disinterested patriotism; while no pleasure arising from the advancement of his fortune, to the neglect of a superior obligation, can balance the upbraidings of that faithful monitor.

VII. In every vote he gives, to be solely directed by the public emolument; and never influenced in his suffrage by motives merely selfish or lucrative.

VIII. To give no leave of absence to a fellow-member on trifling occasions, in hopes of the same indulgence in return; but to be strenuous in supporting the rules and orders of the House, (which are the life of business) tho' he may thereby disoblige an irregular, or disappoint an home-sick individual.

IX. Inflexible in his resolution of acting agreeably to the dictates of his conscience, — to be utterly regardless of the applause or censure, that may ensue upon the discharge of his duty.

X. Never to be instrumental in promoting to any office or trust, his dearest connections or intimates, whom he believes not qualified for the department; nor ever to oppose the promotion of any that are, from personal pique or resentment.

XI. As the best calculated laws will be found ineffectual to regulate a people of dissolute morals, he will recommend by his conversation and example, virtue and purity of manners; and discountenance all irreligion and immorality, as equally fatal to the interests of civil society and personal happiness.

XII. Serenely to enjoy the praises acquired by his merit, as an additional testimony to the approbation of his own heart, of the rectitude of his conduct; but from the public clamour and obloquy, to retire *within himself*; and there to feast on his own virtue, without seeking to retaliate the ingratitude of unreasonable men, save only by putting their malevolence to the blush, by fresh and more extensive services to his country.

CATO²

1. That is, the regulation of the state with regard to the health, morals, welfare, and safety of the public.

2. In style of writing and manner of argument "Cato" is reminiscent of John Witherspoon, who, though not a member of the assembly, surely devoted considerable thought to the responsibilities of a representative; he was a delegate to the Continental Congress from 1776 to 1782. Moreover, in another instance Witherspoon almost certainly employed the pseudonym "Cato" (see Doc. 3, note 2.)

3 "Cato" on the "Importance of a Liberal Education to Civil Society"

[*New-Jersey Gazette*, January 14, 1778.]