

#### IV THE DIE IS CAST

hopes of Conciliation Between Briten & her Colonies are at an end for Both the king & his Parliement have announced our Destruction: fleet and armies are Prepareing with utmost diligence for that Purpose.

April 23rd [1775]. As every Day Brings New Troubels So this Day Brings News that yesterday very early in the morning They Began to fight at Boston.<sup>3</sup> The regulors We hear Shot first there; they killd 30 of our men A hundred & 50 of the Regulors. . . .

Monday May first [1775]. This day I think is a Day of mourning. We have word Come that the fleet is coming into Newyork also & to Day the men of our Town is to have a general meeting to Conclud upon measures Which may Be most Proper to be taken; they have Chose men to act for them & I hope the Lord will Give them Wisdom to Conduct wisely & Prudently In all Matters.

1. The Tea Act of 1773 set off a chain-reaction that led to the Boston Tea Party, which in turn led to the passage of the Coercive Acts by Parliament and thence to the convening of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia on September 5.

2. Date unknown since the entries in the diary are irregular and often undated. However, it would seem that the notation was made in late March or, as is more likely, in mid-April. The comment about the actions taken by the king and Parliament probably refers to the decisions made in February to couple the offer of a compromise on parliamentary taxation of the colonies with an augmentation of military and naval forces in America. News of such decisions would have taken approximately six weeks to reach the colonies. Moreover, the next entry in the diary is dated April 23.

3. The skirmish at Lexington and Concord between British regulars and colonial militiamen that occurred on April 19. News of the incident reached New York City by express rider at 4 p.m. on April 23 and spread immediately by word of mouth through northern New Jersey.

### 13 Jonathan Elmer, Address to the Inhabitants of Cumberland County

[Personal Papers: Jonathan Elmer, Library of Congress.]

Dr. Jonathan Elmer (1745-1817) established practice in his native Cumberland County after graduating from the first medical class of the College of Philadelphia (now University of Pennsylvania) in 1769. Like the other members of the large and influential Elmer clan, Jonathan was an active Whig.

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He served as a delegate to the New Jersey Provincial Congress in 1775 and later that year entered military service to aid in the war for independence. His address to the people of Cumberland County in the spring of 1775 is a poignant distillation of the views held by most ardent Jersey Whigs—that the crux of the Anglo-American controversy was taxation, that the blame lay with British ministers rather than George III, that hopes of reconciliation were slight, and that men were willing to take up arms to defend their liberties.

[May 1775]<sup>1</sup>

Gentlemen

Before we enter on the business of our present meeting, which will be laid before you by the Committee, give me leave to say a few words to you on the present situation of public affairs.

America has never seen a more *critical* period than the present. A daring and resolute retailer of Lord Bute's popish & despotic system of politics has, for a series of years past, assiduously endeavored by every imaginable artifice to enslave us;<sup>2</sup> but the freeborn Colonists who have extended the British Empire over this once savage land fired with the love of liberty, have resolutely opposed every attack hitherto made to infringe their constitutional rights & privileges.

As nothing in the present alarming situation of affairs can be entered upon by honest men with spirit & resolution till they are first convinced of the *Justice* of their cause, let us without prejudice seriously enquire whether the present struggles of America are defensible on principles of equity & the british Constitution? If we are wrong we ought to give up honourably before force extorts a submission; if we are right let us act like true patriots & hold out to the last be the consequence what it will.

The original source of our present disputes is reducible to this single question: Has the parliament of Great Britain a right to Tax America internally? If they have we are wrong in opposing them; if they have not we are under indispensable obligations to resist, and that they have no such right will appear fully evident from the following single consideration. It is a truth too obvious to admit of being disputed that two perfect rights can never interfere, for to suppose they could would be to suppose that two persons might have a just right to one & the same thing which is inconsistent. If therefore the parliament has a just right to demand our property we cannot in justice withhold it; & if they have a right to take from us one penny without our consent, by this same rule they have a right to take all we have. From which the consequence is demonstrably evident that we have no property at all, for, to use the words of the celebrated *Mr. Locke* "what property has any man in that which another has a right to take from him when he pleases"<sup>3</sup>

It being evident then that the parliament has no right to impose taxes on America, it follows that their claim is no better founded than the robber's who demands my money with a pistol at my breast. For no proposition in Euclid<sup>4</sup> is more capable of demonstration than that such a man has as good a right to the money in my pocket as the parliament to tax us without our consent. We are therefore justified by the fundamental principles of our constitution, by reason, by nature, yea by God himself in opposing with all our might the payment of every such demand. The cause

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we are engaged in is good. We are only contending for our constitutional rights & privileges & that Liberty wherewith God hath made us free, & may he enable us to persevere therein with unshaken resolution till we gain the point. For we are actually reduced to the horrid alternative either to acknowledge ourselves tenants at will to the British parliament or resolutely oppose them & matters seem to have gone so far that unless we tamely submit a civil war must inevitably ensue.

A base & venal parliament stands constantly ready to rivet on us those chains which Lord North<sup>5</sup> hath forged. In vain has Chatham<sup>6</sup> plead, in vain has Camden<sup>7</sup> reasoned, & in vain has Burke<sup>8</sup> exhausted the powers of eloquence in demonstrating our right of exemption from parliamentary Taxation, they are perpetually overruled by a majority so that we have nothing to expect from parliament but a mean compliance with every demand of the ministry. And as they have declared their intention of enforcing their measures with the Sword & as hostilities are actually begun in our Sister Colony of Massachusetts Bay<sup>9</sup> our only dependance now is on our own strength & unanimity & with confidence I speak it if we will but be firm & united we shall undoubtedly succeed.

The parliament may persist in making Laws but the whole power of Great Britain will never be able to enforce our compliance with them.

Courage then my friends! Let us convince the world that Britons will be Britons still in every age & every clime; That we value our Liberties as dearer than our Lives. No nation or people under heaven ever drew the Sword in support of a juster or nobler cause than that in which we are now engaged. I would therefore fain persuade myself that no one present entertains the least scruples about heartily engaging in defence of our common Liberties. It is not our Sovereign we are opposing. It is not King George we mean to resist; we acknowledge ourselves his loyal subjects, we solemnly declare our firm attachment to his royal person family & interest & are willing to risque our lives in support of his Crown & dignity; but tis his corrupt & despotic ministry we oppose & I hope are all firmly resolved to oppose even at the expense of our lives & fortunes & I make no doubt but resolution & unanimity in so good a cause will render us invincible.

Remember my friends, the success that crowned our Opposition to the Stamp Act. Call to mind the heroism of our ancestors who fled from Tyranny & persecution to this uncultivated land, fearing less from savage beasts & savage men than from slavery the worst of savages. Let us think of our posterity and transmit to them the fair inheritance of Liberty handed down to us from our glorious progenitors. Let us continually place before our eyes the shining example of those good old English patriots who by boldly opposing the arbitrary designs of their Sovereign King James the 2d. & snatching the iron rod of Slavery out of the hands of royalty itself saved the nation from destruction & secured to their successors those blessed privileges which they have enjoyed ever since the revolution under King William the 3d.<sup>10</sup> May the complicated Idea kindle the same flame of genuine patriotism in each of our breasts that glowed in theirs that we upon this trying occasion may sacrifice every private consideration to the public good: For, to use the words of a celebrated american patriot:<sup>11</sup> "Whoever would give up *essential liberty* to purchase a little *temporary safety* deserves neither *liberty* nor *safety*."

If the parliament's claim of internal taxation be established either by our own consent or a military force that moment we are transformed into slaves. All our property will be at the absolute disposal of the house of Commons. Death itself is an

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event devoutly to be wished for in comparison of such a state. Let us then act wisely, of two evils choose the least & resolve rather to *die* in the glorious cause of Liberty than *live* ignoble slaves.

And shall we tamely yield ourselves to bondage?  
Bow down before those proud imperious Tyrants,  
And bid them tread upon our slavish Necks?  
No; Let this faithful *freeborn English* hand,  
First dig my grave in liberty & honor,  
And tho' I found but *one* more thus resolv'd  
That *honest* man & I would die together.

1. There is confusion as to the date of Elmer's speech. Early accounts stated that it was delivered on May 16, 1775. But Robert P. Elmer, owner of the manuscript, who in 1943 deposited with the Library of Congress a typescript "copied . . . in its entirety and with all variations in spelling and the like," asserted unequivocally that the original "distinctly, in large letters, says only May 1774." Whatever the date on the document (a slip of the pen could have caused an error), Jonathan Elmer cannot have made the remarks in 1774. In the first place, he refers to a meeting of the Cumberland committee; no such organization was formed in the county until December 1774. Second, the outbreak of armed conflict in Massachusetts he mentions is logically the fighting at Lexington and Concord rather than the passage of the Boston Port Act. Third, Elmer was too close to the political pulse of the community to have uttered such incongruous statements; there is no evidence that any Jerseyman so boldly advocated taking up arms in the spring of 1774.

2. The references are to George III and John Stuart, the Earl of Bute, who, in addition to being chief minister, was the king's alter ego and political tutor during the early years of his reign.

3. John Locke, the famous English philosopher. The quotation is from his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690).

4. Euclid, third century B.C. Greek mathematician best known for his *Elements*, a treatise on geometry. Elmer is referring to the logic of geometric principles.

5. Frederick, Lord North, the Earl of Guilford, who served as prime minister from 1770 to 1782.

6. William Pitt, who took the title Earl of Chatham in 1766.

7. Charles Pratt, Lord Camden, defender of American interests in the House of Lords.

8. Edmund Burke, member of the House of Lords and political philosopher who championed the American cause during the Stamp Act and Townshend duties crises.

9. The skirmishes at Lexington and Concord.

10. The Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 in which Protestants William and Mary took the throne at the expense of Catholic James II.

11. Benjamin Franklin.