

## VI EMPIRE OR INDEPENDENCE

duty to warn you of our common danger. I hope you will exert yourselves, and I trust that your own virtue and that kind Providence which has hitherto assisted us, will yet save us.

CIMON<sup>3</sup>

1. In July 1775 the Continental Congress authorized the Massachusetts rebels to assume governance of the colony under the Charter of 1691; in January 1776 New Hampshire secessionists adopted a state constitution which, after approval from Philadelphia, became operative in March. In May the Congress instructed all colonies to erect republican governments.

2. See Doc. 5, note 2.

3. Cimon was the Athenian statesman and soldier who led the aristocratic party in opposition to Themistocles and Pericles.

### 10 Elias Boudinot versus John Witherspoon on Independence

[Boudinot, *Journal or Historical Recollections of American Events During the Revolutionary War* (Philadelphia, 1894), pp. 4-8.]

Cognizant that the May election for representatives to the Third Provincial Congress would be considered a poll on the question of independence, the Somerset County committee, chaired by the Reverend John Witherspoon, attempted to organize an effort to promote the selection of secessionist candidates. Letters were sent on March 27 to each of the county committees inviting them to send delegates to a conference in New Brunswick on April 18 to discuss "some matters of great importance"; an announcement of the meeting was also carried in *Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet; or, the General Advertiser* on April 1. That independence was taboo among Jersey Whigs as late as April 1776 is demonstrated by the debate which ensued at the conclave between Witherspoon and Elias Boudinot and by the subsequent defeat of the Somerset scheme.

[April 18, 1776]

. . . . In 1776 in the month of April, an invitation was given in the News Paper of New Jersey (but without a name) for each County to choose delegates or a Committee to meet at New Brunswick on matters which greatly concerned the Province—but it was generally conceived to be designed to promote some general

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plan relative to a Market for home manufactures in each County.<sup>1</sup> Committees were generally appointed, Altho' the publication made but little impression on the minds of the people at large. At this time the stated Meeting of the Trustees of the College of New Jersey was held at Princeton. Being one of the Trustees, I attended, but we were surprised, to find our President, the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon had absented himself on the 2nd day of our meeting. We finished our Business and the next day, was returning home without reflecting at all on the meeting to be held at New Brunswick, having totally forgotten it. In company with Wm. P. Smith Esq<sup>2</sup> another of the Trustees, arrived at New Brunswick about 11 O'clock A.M., and after feeding our Horse[s], meant to have dined at Woodbridge. In the mean time an acquaintance from the County of Bergen came into the Tavern. He informed us that he was one of the Committee from that County, That Dr. Witherspoon had met the united Committees, and acknowledge himself the Author of the publication, and informed them, that the design of the meeting was, to consider the peculiar situation of the Province, and the propriety of declaring a separation from Great Brittain, and forming an independent Constitution for ourselves, and as he did not wish to precipitate so important a step, he proposed adjorning till the afternoon, when he would offer his reasons at large, and in the mean time, each Member might think seriously on the Subject. This unexpected account raised our Curiosity, and Mr. Smith, & Myself agreed to stay and hear what might be said on the Subject, but before the meeting adjorned, they resolved to request, that as the subject was one which interested every Inhabitant of the Province, any of the Audience might come forward & deliver his Sentiments altho' he could not vote on the Question.

We accordingly attended the Meeting in the Afternoon when Dr. W. rose and in a very able and elegant speech of one hour and an half endeavoured to convince the audience & the Committee of the absurdity of opposing the extravagant demands of Great Brittain, while we were professing a perfect allegiance to her Authority and supporting her courts of Justice. The Character of the speaker, his great Influence among the People, his known attachment to the liberties of the People, and the artful manner in which he represented the whole subject, as worthy their attention, had an effect, on the assembly that astonished me.

There appeared a general approbation of the measure, and I strongly suspected an universal acquiescence of both Committee & Audience in approving the Doctor's Scheme. I never felt myself in a more mortifying Situation. The anonymous publication; The Meeting of the Trustees of the College but the Day before made up wholly of Presbyterians; Their President leaving them to attend the meeting & avowing himself the Author of it; The Doctor known to be at the head of the Presbyterian Interest; and Mr. Smith & Myself both Presbyterians, arriving at New Brunswick in the morning, as if intending to go forward & then staying and attending the meeting, altogether looked so like a preconcerted Scheme, to accomplish the End, that I was at my wit's end, to know how to extricate myself from so disagreeable a situation, especially as the measure was totally ag[ainst] my Judgment.

On a minutes Conversation with Mr. Smith, I determined at all events to step forward & leave my Testimony of the Scheme in toto. Two of the Committee had delayed the Question by speaking in favour of it, but no one had spoken in opposition, till I rose, and in a speech of about half an hour or better, stated my peculiar Situation and endeavoured to show the fallacy of the Doctors Argument, —

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That his plan was neither founded in Wisdom, Prudence, nor Economy; That we had chosen a Continental Congress, to whom we had resigned the Consideration of our public affairs; That they, coming from every part of the Union, would best represent all the Colonies now thus united. They would know the true Situation of our Country with regard to finances, Union & the prospects we had of a happy reconciliation with the Mother Country; They would also be possessed of our relative Circumstances with regard to the other Nations of Europe. In short that they were the only proper Judges of the measures to be pursued, and that we had no right to involve them in distress and trouble by plunging ourselves into measures of so delicate a nature, until they should advise us in what manner to proceed etc. etc.

This opposition wholly unexpected by the Doctor with great attention of all present, a little disconcerted him. But he soon recovered himself, and began a reply when two or three Gent[lemen] of the Audience came to me & desired that I would inform the Doctor, that if he proceeded any farther, they would not be answerable for his safety. I answered, that the request was an unreasonable one; That I had been the only person present who had opposed him, that he had a right to be heard in reply, and if they disliked the proposition, they ought openly to come forward & to give their opinion.

The Doctor had not spoken twenty minutes, when I observed some person whispering to him. He directly stopped, informed the Chairman, that he found that he was giving offence, and therefore he should say no more on the subject, but hoped that the Committees would return to their respective Counties & consult their Constituents, without coming to any determination on the Subject.

To this I objected, urging the impropriety of breaking up without a Vote, as in that Case the opinion of the meeting would be variously reported in the different Counties, according to each mans political Creed, and the people would by these means be led astray.

The Doctor was a good deal out of humor & contended warmly against a vote, but a large Majority of the Meeting insisted on a Vote, which, being taken, out of 36 Members, there were but 3 or 4 who Voted for the Doctors proposition, the rest rejecting it with great warmth. Thus ended this first attempt to try the pulse of the People of New Jersey on the Subject of Independence; and yet when advised by the Continental Congress, no part of the Union were more trusty than the State of New Jersey.

1. Aside from the fact that there was no newspaper—nor any ongoing newsheet—in New Jersey at the time, Boudinot is mistaken about the background of the meeting. His confusion about the reason for the conference may have stemmed from the plan, designed by Witherspoon and implemented by the Somerset committee in February, to promote domestic manufacturing by holding regulated market days at specific dates in various sections of the county. See the March 11 issue of *Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet*.

2. William Peartree Smith, independently wealthy resident of Elizabethtown who was a close friend of William Livingston. A firm Presbyterian, Smith was a principal patron of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University).