

11 The Reverend John Witherspoon, "On the Controversy About Independence"

[*Works of John Witherspoon*, 9:78-82.]

One of the most powerful and persuasive arguments raised by advocates of independence was that there simply was no alternative to withdrawal from the British Empire. Secessionists could point to numerous attempts to resolve the differences subsisting between Britain and America—all of which came to naught. Moreover, what was the alternative to independence? Unfortunately for the empire, conservatives had none; they could only try to counter the move toward independence with vague talk of the glories of the English constitution and empty promises of a better tomorrow. In the end, many Americans marched along the path of independence because it was the only reasonable course left to follow.

[April-May 1776]¹

Sir,

I beg leave by your assistance, to publish² a few thoughts upon the matter of conducting, what I think is now called the independent controversy, in which this country in general is so greatly interested. Every one knows that when the claims of the British Parliament were openly made, and violently enforced, the most precise and determined resolutions were entered into, and published by every colony, every county, and almost every township or smaller district, that they would not submit to them.³ This was clearly expressed in the greatest part of them, and ought to be understood as the implied sense of them all, not only that they would not *soon* or *easily*, but that they would *never*, on *any event*, submit to them. For my own part, I confess, I never would have signed these resolves at first, nor taken up arms⁴ in consequence of them afterwards, if I had not been fully convinced, as I am still, that acquiescence in this usurped power, would be followed by the total and absolute ruin of the colonies. They would have been no better than tributary states to a kingdom at a great distance from them. They would have been therefore, as has been the case with all states in a similar situation from the beginning of the world, the servants of servants from generation to generation. For this reason I declare it to have been my meaning, and I know it was the meaning of thousands more, that though we earnestly wished for reconciliation with safety to our liberties, yet we did deliberately prefer, not only the horrors of a civil war, not only the danger of anarchy, and the uncertainty of a new settlement, but even extermination itself, to slavery, rivetted on us and our posterity.

The most peaceable means were first used; but no relaxation could be obtained: one arbitrary and oppressive act followed after another; they destroyed the property of a whole capital, subverted to its very foundation the constitution and government of a whole colony, and granted the soldiers a liberty of *murdering* in all the colonies.⁵ I express it thus, because they were not able to be called to account for it where it was

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committed, which every body must allow was a temporary, and undoubtedly, in ninety-nine cases of an hundred, must have issued in a total impunity. There is one circumstance however in my opinion, much more curious than all the rest. The reader will say, What can this be? It is the following, which I beg may be particularly attended to: While all this was a doing, the king in his speeches, the parliament in their acts, and the people of Great Britain in their addresses, never failed to extol their own lenity. I do not infer from this, that the king, parliament and people of Great Britain are all barbarians and savages—the inference is unnecessary and unjust. But I infer the misery of the people of America, if they must submit *in all cases whatsoever*,⁶ to the decisions of a body of the sons of Adam, so distant from them, and who have an interest in oppressing them. It has been my opinion from the beginning, that we did not carry our reasoning fully home, when we complained of an arbitrary prince, or of the insolence, cruelty and obstinacy of Lord North,⁷ Lord Bute,⁸ or Lord Mansfield.⁹ What we have to fear, and what we have now to grapple with, is the ignorance, prejudice, partiality and injustice of human nature. Neither king nor ministry, could have done, nor durst have attempted what we have seen, if they had not had the nation on their side. The friends of America in England are few in number, and contemptible in influence; nor must I omit, that even of these few, not one, till very lately, ever reasoned the American cause upon its proper principles, or viewed it in its proper light.

Petitions on petitions have been presented to king and parliament, and an address sent to the people of Great Britain,¹⁰ which have not merely been fruitless, but treated with the highest degree of disdain. The conduct of the British ministry during the whole of the contest, as has been often observed, has been such, as to irritate the whole people of this continent to the highest degree, and unite them together by the firm bond of necessity and common interest. In this respect they have served us in the most essential manner. I am firmly persuaded, that had the wisest heads in America met together to contrive what measures the ministry should follow to strengthen the American opposition and defeat their own designs, they could not have fallen upon a plan so effectual, as that which has been steadily pursued. One instance I cannot help mentioning, because it was both of more importance, and less to be expected than any other. When a majority of the New-York Assembly, to their eternal infamy, attempted to break the union of the colonies, by refusing to approve the proceedings of the Congress, and applying to Parliament by separate petition—because they presumed to make mention of the principal grievance of taxation, it was treated with ineffable contempt.¹¹ I desire it may be observed, that those who are called the friends of America in Parliament, pleaded strongly for receiving the New-York petition; which plainly shewed, that neither the one nor the other understood the state of affairs in America. Had the ministry been prudent, or the opposition successful, we had been ruined; but with what transport did every friend to American liberty hear, that these traitors to the common cause had met with the reception which they deserved.

Nothing is more manifest, than that the people of Great Britain, and even the king and ministry, have been hitherto exceedingly ignorant of the state of things in America. For this reason, their measures have been ridiculous in the highest degree, and the issue disgraceful. There are some who will not believe that they are ignorant—they tell us, how can this be? Have they not multitudes in this country who gave them intelligence from the beginning? Yes they have; but they would

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trust none but what they called official intelligence, that is to say, from obsequious, interested tools of government; many of them knew little of the true state of things themselves, and when they did, would not tell it, lest it should be disagreeable. I have not a very high opinion of the integrity and candour of Dr. C_____, Dr. C_____,¹² and other mercenary writers in New-York; yet I firmly believe, that they thought the friends of American liberty much more inconsiderable, both for weight and numbers, than they were. They conversed with few but those of their own way of thinking, and according to the common deception of little minds, mistook the sentiments prevailing within the circle of their own acquaintance, for the judgment of the public.

1. The undated essay was probably written in late April or early May 1776. When Jerseymen went to the polls in the latter weeks of May to elect new delegates to the Provincial Congress the issue of the campaign was independence.

2. Apparently the essay was never published; I have not found it in any newspaper of the time.

3. The "resolves" are those adopted by mass meetings in the wake of the Massachusetts Acts of 1774. See Sec. III, Docs. 2 and 4.

4. Witherspoon is being disingenuous: he never took up arms or participated in military activities.

5. The Massachusetts ("Coercive") Acts of 1774.

6. The crucial quotation from the Declaratory Act of 1766, positing unrestricted parliamentary authority over the colonies.

7. Frederick, Lord North, chief minister of the British government from 1770-1782.

8. John Stuart, Earl of Bute, tutor and confidant of George III during the early years of his reign and principal architect of the new imperial program for America that took shape during the closing stages of the French and Indian War.

9. William Murray, Lord Mansfield, chief justice of the Court of the King's Bench, 1758-1788, who consistently upheld the legality of controversial imperial legislation affecting America.

10. On October 21, 1774, the First Continental Congress adopted an address to the people of Great Britain informing them of colonial grievances and imploring their assistance in securing redress.

11. When the New York assembly met in January 1775, it not only refused to endorse the proceedings of the First Continental Congress but also violated the spirit of the Congress by unilaterally sending petitions to the king, Commons, and Lords. Both houses of Parliament declined to receive the petitions.

12. The reference is to the leading Tory pamphleteers of the middle colonies, the Reverends Myles Cooper, president of King's College (now Columbia University), and Thomas Bradbury Chandler (see Sec. VIII, Doc. 2, headnote).