

VI EMPIRE OR INDEPENDENCE

Next Monday is the day we propose to set for the attack on Quebeck.

Please give my kind respects to our family, and remember me to all enquiring friends. Please to give my particular respects to Major Brearley.²

Adieu

JOSEPH BREARLEY CAPT.

1. General Charles Lee, who later figured prominently in the battle of Monmouth (see Sec. IX, Doc. 7).

2. Probably a reference to their father, David Brearley (1703-1785), who lived on the family estate Spring Grove near Maidenhead (now Lawrence Township).

5 Charles Pettit to Joseph Reed

[Reed Papers, 3:13, New-York Historical Society.]

Perhaps because of their unstable social and political orders, the Middle Atlantic colonies in general did not share the enthusiasm for independence that gripped first New England and then the South. By the spring of 1776 strong Jersey Whigs like Charles Pettit were concerned less about the opposition of the vocal royalist minority than the ambivalence of the uncommitted. While there existed a large potential base of support for independence in New Jersey, most citizens understandably faced the prospect of separation from the empire with apprehension and hesitation; they had not yet become convinced of the need for independence, and thus they were not willing to take rash steps. Time would be required to overcome the trauma of committing treason against the mother country, to demonstrate the viability of the popular front, and to expose the chimerical hopes of reconciliation whether through parliamentary action or the negotiations of special commissioners.

Amboy March 25 1776

Dear Sir

. . . . However determined the Congress¹ may be to cut the Ligament, it would certainly be attended with Danger to do it suddenly in the present State of Things. For however right and necessary the Measure may be the People at large must individually see and feel the Necessity and Propriety of it before they will give it such an Acquiescence as is necessary to ensure it success. An explicit Declaration of it now,

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

would probably raise up such a Schism as would be more dreadful than any outward Enemy, Whereas a few Months, perhaps a few weeks may, like the Sun to ripening Fruit, make that pleasant and desirable which at present appears sour and disgusting. Besides the Congress have no Occasion to be hasty in the Matter. They may, and I presume do take all their Measures on this same Plan without a Declaration as they would with it, and the Work will in Effect be accomplished before the Multitude perceive it is begun. But a very important Work remains for the People in every Province—the settling a provincial Constitution, and much I take it depends on the Course we shall first set out in, for Waters generally continue to run in the Channels they first form however crooked & intricate they may be, and so it is in a great Measure with a People.

As to the Commissioners we have heard so much of, I have scarce a distant Hope of any Good from their Embassy.² Whatever might have been in the King's Power before, the Acts of Parliament made during the Contest, & especially this last,³ do not leave him the Power to authorise Commissioners to offer Terms that can possibly be accepted; nor can Commissioners derive Authority competent to the Business by any Means short of an Act of Parliament for the Purpose; and we do not find the most distant Hint that such an Act has been thought of. I look for nothing more in them, therefore, than Spies & Emissaries coming to get as full Information of the real State of the Country as they can, and to tamper with the Provincial Legislatures if possible, or even with inferior Bodies of Men and perhaps with Individuals. Their Power I take to be nearly explained in Governor Tryon's *heavenly* Address to the People of New York.⁴ I heard another Governor lately say he imagined they would not exceed two or three in Number; but whether this was a mere conjecture of his own, or drawn from Letters by the Packet,⁵ I did not learn. However, I find since the Arrival of the Packet they speak confidently of the *Faction* in Opposition to Government crumbling away. They say it is already sunk into Contempt, and that loyal Addresses are daily pouring in from all Quarters promising Assistance with *Lives & Fortunes* against all *Rebels* and *Traitors* as well as within the Kingdom as without. Whether it be that they imagine the People of this Country are or will be really intimidated by these Reports so as to knock at the "*Door of Mercy*", or that the Ministry have determined to hold forth Terms that are more likely to be accepted; but from some Cause or other, Inferior Tories yelp out Peace with more Confidence than they have done for some Time past. I cannot find however, that they have any other Ground for it than the Expectation of Commissioners, nor that they know any thing more about them or the Authority they are to have than other People do. On the other Hand the Superiors of that Order, who may be supposed to have better Intelligence from England speak on the Subject only in mysterious Hints, and seem to have little Expectation from the Commissioners as Negotiators. Some doubt their coming at all; and others seem to consider them as Angels coming from a Superior Region to give the last solemn Warning to the deluded Americans of the Danger hanging over them, and to offer Pardon and Mercy to those who repent and will accept it on the Terms they can give. The Petition of the Assembly of Nova Scotia⁶ is spoken of in high Terms, and it is much regretted that we have not taken the same Course: But, so great is the Tenderness and Compassion of great Britain that it is hoped, yea believed, we might all yet obtain the same Terms by the same Means, notwithstanding the Enormity of our Guilt. . . .

In the mean Time I am gardening & making other preparations for Summer as

VI EMPIRE OR INDEPENDENCE

if all was Peace: but who will reap the Harvest is yet uncertain. . . .

With the most affectionate Regards,

I am Dr. Sir

Yours

CHAS. PETTIT

1. The reference is probably to the growing radical influence in the Continental Congress as well as its action in instructing the colonies which had not already done so to replace royal government with revolutionary regimes.

2. Since the fall of 1775 the ministry of Lord North had discussed sending peace commissioners to America to negotiate directly with the colonies. Differences over terms and personnel delayed formation of the commission until May 1776, at which time the brothers Howe (General Sir William and Admiral Lord Richard), commanders of British military and naval forces in North America, were designated peace commissioners. Lord Richard arrived in the colonies in June, at a time when American independence was all but declared.

3. The American Prohibitory Act of December 22, 1775, which placed a commercial embargo against the rebellious colonies.

4. William Tryon, governor of New York. On March 16, 1775, brazenly calling upon the "deluded" rebels to return to their proper allegiance to the king, he pledged strong support for the Loyalists. His empty remarks were widely ridiculed.

5. A packet was a vessel which carried mail in addition to passengers and cargo; it usually sailed according to a fixed schedule.

6. On June 24, 1775, the assembly of Nova Scotia petitioned the king and both houses of Parliament, professing loyalty to the British government, announcing a position of neutrality toward the rebellious colonies to the south, and appealing for an Anglo-American reconciliation. With regard to the latter point, the petition proposed to solve the taxation quandary by means of a duty (to be adjusted every decade) on all products except salt imported to America from outside the British Empire.

6 [Ebenezer Elmer?], Valedictory Address to Captain Joseph Bloomfield's Company of Continental Forces

[Appended to the "Plain Dealer," Alexander Library, Rutgers University.]

Military service was an important, perhaps the most important, impetus to